# The Torch of Life

Rachel Swete Macnamara

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*By Rachel S. Macnamara*

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The Fringe of the Desert

The Torch of Life

# THE TORCH OF LIFE

BY

RACHEL SWETE MACNAMARA

AUTHOR OF
"THE FRINGE OF THE DESERT," ETC.

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To

L. E. L.

FOR MANY REASONS

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# THE TORCH OF LIFE

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## BOOK I

## CHAPTER I

### THE INEVITABLE

TITIAN FLEURY sat up in bed and pushed back her sleep-ruffled hair from her forehead. One dark red plait fell over her shoulder across the transparencies of her nightdress, the other, with its curling ends undone, sprayed out on the pillow behind her. Her lips were parted, her brown sleep-filled eyes dazed and incredulous.

The hushed news which Marshall had proffered with her morning tea—news given with the solemn elation of one who at once supplies bane and antidote—seemed impossible, unbelievable.

Arnot, her husband, was dead.

Dead! And when she had bidden him good-night but a few hours since he had seemed just as

usual, just as he had always been in the ten strange years of their married life.

His parting words rang in her ears. They were his usual nightly valediction, uttered then, she fancied with a little prick of gladness, in a rather softer tone than usual.

"Good-night, Titian. Go to bed quickly. You mustn't lose any of your beauty sleep."

Her beauty sleep. Her looks. The fairness of the outer shell was all that he had ever cared for. An old resentment surged hotly upwards. Then she realised from the maid's tarrying gaze, that her hands were arrested in the soft masses of her hair and that Marshall, with an irritating air of doleful excitement, was still holding out the little green tray with its violet-sprigged tea-set.

A sudden trembling seized her. The affrighting news was not, could not be true.

"It's not true, Marshall," she cried, shivering. "It's not true."

"I'm afraid it is, madam. But you mustn't fret. Very quiet and peaceful it was, Hammond says. He went in as usual with Mr. Fleury's chocolate this morning and—found him."

"*Found him?*"

"Just as if he was asleep. Must have passed

away quite quiet-like." The woman brought a little table to the bedside and put the tray on it. She radiated subdued importance. So rare a chance of playing Mercury to the high gods had never fallen to her colourless lot before; she revelled in its most minute possibilities. "A happy release, that's what it was, madam. You mustn't fret. Poor gentleman. A suffering life. Just as if he was asleep, Hammond says."

"Did Hammond hear nothing in the night? No stir? No cry?"

"Not a sound, madam. He went in and out during the night just as usual. He turned him once, and the last time he was in before—" Marshall paused to give the ellipsis its full grim significance—"Mr. Fleury was sleeping that peaceful that he didn't like to disturb him."

"Sleeping? Are you sure?"

"Sleeping *and* breathing, madam. As quiet as a child, Hammond says. And then—but won't you take your tea? It's getting cold."

"No. Take it away. It would choke me."

"Oh, no, it won't choke you. It will do you good," said Marshall, pouring it out. "There's nothing like a cup of tea when one is in trouble."

"A cup of tea! Oh, Marshall!" Titian gave a queer strangled little laugh.

"Come now, drink it up." The woman spoke as one would to a child, as, in truth, her mistress always seemed to her despite her twenty-nine years. "It will do you good, madam. You mustn't give way."

"Give way?" Titian echoed dully.

No, she would not give way. How could she give way? To what would she give way? No sudden flood of grief rushed through her being; all the sluice-gates of her emotion seemed doubly, trebly locked. She was only conscious of a physical coldness and a mental numbness which seemed to cloak all powers of perception and to stifle feeling. Hours seemed to have passed since the moment of Marshall's chill announcement. In some strange way it seemed as if she had always known of Arnot's death. Arnot, who had looked at her with his twisted smile but ten brief hours ago; who had patted her cheek with his thin hand as she bent over his couch to kiss him "good-night," who had even said, —yes, she suddenly remembered it,—"How beautiful you keep!" as he lightly stroked its creamy curve.

Arnot was dead.

His crippled thwarted life was over. He slept "like a child"—a child? He the cynic, the

mocker, the clever man, who had so often played with her simplicity and whipped it to tatters with the keen lash of his tongue. He, who had sometimes seemed to draw her to him with the one hand while he thrust her from him with the other—he, Arnot, was dead; and she, with the beauty of body which he had cherished, and the beauty of soul which he had ignored, was no more to him now than the veriest triviality of his shed life.

"Do take your tea, madam," Marshall urged.

Titian started, shivered again, and, taking the cup from the woman's hand with a passivity engendered by the past ten years, drank the tea obediently. Then she pushed aside the bedclothes and thrust out a reluctant foot.

"I must go. I must be there," she said tentatively.

Marshall pulled up the bedclothes with firmness. Bed was the proper place for a widow—bed, and present invisibility.

"No, madam," she asserted. "Hammond has done all that is necessary. He sent off at once for Dr. Bailey and Mr. Mede. They will be here immediately."

Titian looked at her and cowered under the bedclothes. She felt stricken with a sudden inexplic-

able fear, a sense of the great still Presence that brooded over the house. With a swift longing for warm human contact she put out her hand and caught Marshall's bony one. For a moment, the maid bore her grasp with embarrassment, and a hesitance which was due rather to an ignorance of what was expected of her than to an actual lack of sympathy.

As Titian shamefacedly withdrew her hand she recalled Arnot's dictum:

"Marshall is about as sympathetic as a toad and as warm-blooded as a fish, but damn it all, she does know how to do your hair!"

Yes, that was all that had mattered. She did know how to do her hair, and she was an expert face-masseuse before whose touch the veriest shadow of a wrinkle fled dismayed. Titian was not allowed to indulge in wrinkles, not even the tiniest footprints of mirth at the corners of her eyes. Her ten years of married life had not been permitted to grave the faintest line upon the exquisite ivory of her complexion. Ten years of hoarded youth had kept her beautiful contours undiminished. Arnot had been a miser, as well as a connoisseur, of her beauty. He had not allowed her to spend it even upon himself.

And now he was dead, and it mattered to him no more!

Suddenly she turned and buried her face in the pillow. Why did she think of these queer things, these horrid things now? Why did she not cry? She ought to cry. She knew that Marshall thought she ought to cry. Perhaps Marshall thought that she *was* crying! She burned suddenly with a sense of hypocrisy as she heard the maid steal from the room and shut the door softly behind her.

The autumn sunshine gleamed dimly through the linen blinds, filling the room with a yellowish twilight, a lifeless glow which seemed to accentuate the sudden desolation.

Outside, in the air and light, the sea crashed with monotonous recurrence against the rocky headland: the faint hiss of withdrawing waves was audible as an incessant whisper. Seagulls screamed with a harsh melancholy, and a rising wind, tinctured with sea-spray, fluttered the blinds to a restless tapping and whipped the window-panes with long lashes of Virginian creeper, to which a tatter of scarlet leaves still clung.

With a stifled moan, Titian hid her hot face deeper.

Was it not Arnot himself who had so striven to

chill her warm impulses and curb her springing emotions, who had so wrought to overlay her budding tendernesses with the patina of his own cynicism, that now she could not pay him even the homage of a tear?

## CHAPTER II

### GREY RETROSPECT

AS she lay there, trying to grasp the full meaning and significance of the incredible thing which had happened, her thoughts wandered, as women's thoughts will often do, from the end to the beginning.

The beginning? When does one begin? she wondered dully. When one is first aware of conscious thought? When one awakes to the realisation of one's own womanhood? When one loves? *When?*

She had been a happy careless child, a happy unquestioning girl until she had met Arnot. Her curiosities about life were the vague unspeculative curiosities of a child. With both hands outstretched, she had taken, laughing, all the flower-gifts of Nature. Of the fruits of Life's harvest she knew nothing and had sought no knowledge.

Of the sailor father, the gay handsome Dicky Bagot, who had transmuted her inappropriate

name of Letitia into Titian to match her ruddy hair, she had infrequent, but glorious memories. He came in and out of her life like bursts of sunshine. Once he went away never to return, and the world for awhile had grown very dark and bleak. Then Time, to youth at once magician and menace, healed the wound of the child. Her mother's wound was decently hidden, but the thrust had cut too deep for any ministration of kindly balm or anodyne. Mrs. Bagot went softly through her savourless days until, having seen her child "comfortably settled," as she phrased it, she faded out of the life which had for her

> "but one last boon to offer,
> And that was—Death!"

With an extraordinary vividness, Titian recalled her first sight of Arnot Fleury. Each detail stood clear as in the captured impression of a picture. The sea-tang in the rising wind emphasised the reality of the vision. . . .

The coming of the strange yacht to the village; the consequent excitement; the golden brilliance of the day, the unbelievable blueness of sea and sky; the warm scent of the furze mingled with the salt whiff from brown nets drying on the old stone pier.

Then Arnot, tall and dark, clad in such immaculate white as her unsophisticated eyes had never seen before, walking up the pier with the Rector, Mr. Gerard.

She remembered how she had stood rooted to the spot with shyness; how they had stopped; how Arnot had looked at her when Mr. Gerard effected the introduction. Even now, the curious quality of his regard, which had seemed to lap her like soft flames, burned in her memory.

She remembered, with a sudden surge of pity, the impression of steel-knit strength that he had made upon her. *Steel-knit strength!* The incongruity of the phrase smote her.

Poor Arnot!

She remembered the odd disquieting effect of his presence, and her swift sense of relief when the Rectory gate had clanged behind him; then her equally swift pang at the realisation that with him had gone some of the brilliance of the day.

She remembered the quick beating of her heart when she caught sight of him in church on Sunday; how a shaft of sunlight, falling athwart the pew he sat in, had seemed to detach him from the rest of the congregation and to emphasise the clearness of his profile, the veiled brightness of his eyes, the proud, almost insolent poise of his head.

Odd that it should be his physical attributes which were so sharply etched upon her memory, while he—she shuddered faintly. Of the man himself, as he had been then, her impressions were more blurred. It was as if that period, which should have been her rosetime, an unfadingly-scented memory, were but a palimpsest on which the inscriptions of the past ten years had been graven so deeply that they obliterated the fainter traceries of that brief passionate interlude.

She had been bewildered, swept off her feet by the impetuosity of his wooing. Her beauty, her simplicity, her shyness, her ignorance, had all appealed to the connoisseur in Arnot Fleury. He was an epicure of emotions, and her absolute freshness savoured of something hitherto untasted. Her soft and gracious beauty appealed in its very immaturity. For him should the bud open, the perfect rose unfold. So Love, so Protean in his changes, touched him to rhapsody. Of the possibilities hidden beneath the lovely surface, he did not pause to think; in his brief wooing, he had not tried to awaken any slumbering passion. Like the gourmet that he was, he preferred to prolong his pleasures, and planned to teach her after marriage how to love him in his own Epicurean fashion.

The munificence of his settlements, the quick

decisiveness of his character, and his not inconsiderable charm of manner, drew gentle Mrs. Bagot into the sphere of his orbit. With Arnot Fleury, to want was to have, a rule of life to which Fortune had hitherto subscribed with astonishing docility. Perfect health, a masterful disposition, a concentrated selfishness, and a purse into which, with due moderation, he could dip at will, combined to produce this somewhat imperial ordering of his life.

At thirty-two it was time to range oneself. Titian Bagot, the lovely experiment, was sufficiently plastic to be moulded to what form he would; beneath those gracious yielding lines must dwell a spirit as graciously yielding. So both plunged into the Unknown, guided by the fatal doctrine of Taking-things-for-granted.

At nineteen Titian had been curiously immature. Her outlook had been that of a child, her horizons oddly limited or wrapped in an impossible golden haze. She had walked into matrimony with the ignorant courage of a child; a little flushed and excited at the possibilities of the unknown, a little frightened, perhaps, of the bewildering and godlike Arnot, but with all the simple trust that her foolishly sheltered life had engendered in her.

Her years had been full of reticences, her inno-

cence guarded with a touching unconsciousness of any possible personal wrong. If it be true that the Spinners of Destinies laugh at our tragedies and weep at our comedies, with what silent laughter must the Loom of Life have shaken on that fragrant summer morning!

Titian recalled it all vaguely. She remembered odd irrelevant incidents, trifles scarcely noted at the time, but now sharply etched upon the dimmer significance of the day.

The mad rapture of the larks when she awoke a little after dawn; her mother's uncontrollable outburst of weeping after she had pinned on her veil; the way the net had clung to her cheek where the tears had fallen; the big velvet bumble-bee that had blundered into her wreath as she went out through the doorway; the detaining touch of the Scotch-rose bush near the gate—a touch which had torn a fragment of Arnot's beautiful lace, but which had to be forgiven to the offending rose, it was so pearly-pink and had such a heavenly smell; the mote-filled dusk of the church.

Then Arnot's face, with its one swift glance of enveloping fire; and a far-off sense of the tremendous import of the vows she was so lightly making before God and man.

She remembered vaguely the reassuring pressure

of Arnot's hand, the brief rapture of a kiss, the new and developing sense of importance, the excitement and delight of the journey, the dainty appointments of the carriage which had met them at the railway station. She could almost hear the ticking of its silver clock, almost smell the perfume of the tuberoses in their silver vase. To this day the scent of tuberoses gave her a sick shudder of horror. . . . They were to drive across London to catch the Continental Express: she was to see all the lovely dream-places of the world. The dream had already begun; she remembered the quick impulse of gratitude which had prompted her to slip her hand into her husband's; out of the mists of the past stabbed the recollection of his passionate response.

"My God, how lovely you are!" he had whispered.

Then with the swift horror of the unexpected had come the cataclysm. No one knew exactly how it had happened. Titian retained a confused memory of a crash, the plunging of hoofs, a violent blow, and then darkness.

When she emerged once more into the light, it was to find that Arnot had sustained such severe spinal injuries that his life was despaired of. Then, when the cloud of desolation which darkened

her young days was lifted a little, and the doctors told her that he would live, but only as a hopeless cripple, paralysed from the waist downwards, the bitterness of his despair, the wild rancour of his railing awoke her once for all from her iris-tinted dreaming, and set her feet in the path of grey reality.

Poor Arnot! How all her warm impulses had surged toward him! How she had begged to be allowed to do even the smallest service for him!

But the nurses had kept her tactfully away. The sight of her excited and irritated him; she belonged to a past which had slipped for ever from his grasp; ill though he was, her presence awoke in him the torments of Tantalus.

Titian, all unwitting, wept bitter tears over her exclusion from his room. Her mother, who had hastened, bewildered, from her solitudes, had no comfort for her. Her councils seemed to the girl tepid, almost platitudinous; she had no conception of her daughter's mental awakening, of the chasm between life and life which she had bridged with a single step. Life had given her no conception of such an upheaval as that which had happened to Titian; she could only urge patience, and again patience, and a remembrance of her duty.

"For better, for worse, you know, my dear. In sickness and in health."

Down the vista of years echoed the deprecating murmur and her own impatient reply:

"Yes, of course, I know. But what's the use of promising that when I am kept away from him in sickness, when I am not allowed to go near him, or do anything for him?"

"Be patient, he is not himself yet. They say that it excited him to see you. Later on, when he is better, he will want you."

But had he? There, packed into the space of five brief words lay the tragedy of Titian Fleury's life. *He had never wanted her.*

"You do not understand men, my dear," went on the gentle creature, who had only half comprehended the one of whom she had always been an adoring echo.

It was too true. Titian did not understand men, or women, or life, or reality, or any of the great essentials, as she suddenly realised with a pang of despairing impotence.

Then out of the grey welter of those nightmare days emerged a comforting vision, the recollection of the coming of Arnot's cousin, Fenton Mede: a big silent man, who seemed to understand without words, whose presence seemed to radiate com-

fort, and whose strong hands gradually drew order out of chaos.

Fenton Mede, Fenty the reliable, as Arnot always called him. They had become fast friends at once. She leaned on him as instinctively as she might have leant on the father who was but a joyous memory.

It was Fenton who had persuaded Arnot to let her come into his room, who had invented little special services for her to do for him, who had brought rare flowers for her to arrange, odd books for her to read to him when he could endure to be read to. All the alleviations of those first strained awkward days had come through Fenton Mede.

Dear old Fenty!

A spring of gratitude welled in her heart at the thought of him.

Mercifully he was at home now, and Hammond had sent for him. He would soon be here, he would know what to do: she could grasp his kind hand, his kind, warm hand.

At the thought an inexplicable rush of loneliness flooded her; and the chill sense of desolation pressed upon her like a tangible weight. How alone she was! How terribly alone! Nobody needed her, nobody wanted her. Even to Arnot

his man Hammond had been more necessary than she, his wife!

His wife! The mockery of the name still had power to prick. She thought that she had got used to it, that the past ten years had schooled her to an apathetic acceptance of the inevitable. She had earnestly cultivated a placid calm, a Buddha-like passivity. No emotions were allowed to trace even a gossamer line on her face or to shadow her tranquil eyes—eyes, she had once thought bitterly, which owned no deeper expression than those of a cow!

But that was what Arnot had desired, and her chief duty in life had been to please him. What that duty had cost her she had never dared to ask.

## CHAPTER III

### PANDORA'S BOX

AS she lay in the great carved bed, hot-eyed and tearless, staring at the flapping yellow blind, it seemed to her as if the news of Arnot's death had set Pandora-fingers at the secret casket of her pent bitternesses and loosed them about her in a bat-winged cloud.

The memory of the months which followed Arnot's accident melted into the grey years of her life at Camus, this old rock-perched castle of his, to which he had been moved when transfer became possible. From the first, Titian had loved its peaceful stateliness. The place seemed to radiate an atmosphere of quietude and dignity after the undercurrent of fuss and busy life at the Nursing-Home; and the subdued richness of its furnishing appealed to some inner sense of beauty in the girl, which had lain dormant in the simplicity of her earlier home life.

The first time she had seen Camus. That was one of the memories.

After the journey had come the swift drive past upland and valley, through thatched village and stunted, wind-trimmed wood, to the lichened castle perched upon the bold red headland which guarded one horn of the bay.

How wearisomely familiar that drive was to become! Every stone on the road she knew, every stain on the cottages' walls, every crooked spine of thorn-bush, whether etched, bare and black, upon a ruddy winter sky or foamed with bridal whiteness against the blue of spring.

The motor-car which had taken Arnot and his attendants had started before their carriage, and the crippled master had been installed in his own room before they arrived.

It was Fenton who had met them on the threshold; who had welcomed Titian to her future home. The reliable Fenty, so unlike the wonderful lover who had rushed her into this amazing marriage, and who seemed to have vanished irrevocably in the shock of the fatal collision.

She remembered the pang it had given her to see the inevitable substitution:—the big, rather heavy figure instead of the clean-knit, alert one, the roughish fair hair and bearded face instead of

the clear-cut features and proudly poised head, the kind glance of sleepy blue eyes instead of the look that had made her tremble so deliciously.

And then to think of the pitiful wreck upstairs, over whom her heart yearned with something that was at least akin to the Great Reality! Still, Youth to whom all things are possible, had been hers, and, in Pandora's box Hope spread her iridescent wings so wide that there was little room for creeping miseries.

She had no response for Fenton's somewhat huskily-given greeting:

"Arnot says that I am to welcome you home for him. It's cruelly hard that he can't do it himself."

Yes, it was,—cruelly hard.

Tears welled into her eyes as she brushed hurriedly past Fenton into the hall. She could not speak; she had no control over her voice; but he had understood. She knew that. It was one of Fenton's good points; he always understood, or nearly always. Little incidents sometimes cropped up in which he had sided with Arnot, when all his pity and sympathy had been for him and not for her; moments in which Fenty had been irritating, even exasperating, but they were rare.

It was Mrs. Bagot who had ventured a timid: "How is he?"

"He has borne the journey wonderfully well. He is in bed now. Nurse and Hammond are with him."

"What a blessing!" Mrs. Bagot had murmured, but whether the benediction referred to the success of the journey or the fact of Arnot's being in bed, or expressed an inner relief at the thought that anyone should be with her son-in-law rather than herself, nobody tried to determine.

She had stood rather in awe of Arnot in masterful health. For Arnot, broken in body and mind, her feeling almost amounted to terror.

Later, Titian had seen her room for the first time—her beautiful room whose charms had long since merged into the commonplace of familiarity; whose unusual yet lovely decorations of palest yellow, burnt rose, and carved oak served as fitting frame for her own beauty.

It was in the west wing of the castle. One window looked out over the open sea; the others faced the sandy curve of the bay, with the village clustering along its margin and climbing up the low brow of the opposite cliff. Camus had the left horn of the crescent all to itself. The village began tentatively at the landward end and drew away in a thicker huddle at the other side.

The squat church tower thrust itself bluntly

through a knot of wind-shorn trees. How often had she seen its lit windows gleam like dim jewels through the darkness of winter evenings! How often had she watched the twinkling lights of the village leap across the dusk—each orange square typifying the glowing centre of a home.

She remembered her vague wonderings as to what life would bring to her on this red rock. Solitude had no terrors for her as yet; her days in her own little village had been sun-filled and happy, although she had had no companions of her own years. If Arnot grew stronger—and happier—and needed her more— Vividly she recalled her trailing thoughts, which had been scattered suddenly by the entrance of a maid with tea. Not Marshall, no, Marshall had been the outcome of later, more critical days—days of reddening shame and swift hidden rebellions.

Verily to-day Pandora's box had been set open wide.

She remembered the refusal of her request to be allowed to go to Arnot; she could see across the past the half-pitying, half-critical look in Fenton's eyes as he offered the usual sop.

"He is too tired to-night. Perhaps to-morrow ——"

"But if I stole in, it could not possibly disturb him."

"He might rouse. It might excite him and spoil his sleep. Perhaps to-morrow——"

Perhaps to-morrow! That was what it had always been.

"When another day is come, lo, we have already spent yesterday's to-morrow," said a wise Latin once. No one seemed to think of that.

Some quick retort sprang for utterance, but she closed her soft lips upon it as she took her seat at the head of the table. Her own table. Her own strangely beautiful table. She studied it with a sense of wonder as her mother and Fenton kept up a desultory conversation. It had lost the charm of novelty by this, but it never failed to arouse a faint feeling of pleasure in what still seemed to her its peculiar perfection.

The strips of finest linen and Venetian lace showing glimpses of the polished oak beneath, the tall Venetian vases with cascades of white, or pink, or lavender orchids spraying over gold-flecked dragons, the twisted silver candelabra thrusting upwards clusters of white candles which blossomed into golden flame, the silver salt-cellars whose clasping sea-nymphs Cellini himself might have fashioned, the Venetian beakers filled with ruddy

or golden wine, the glasses fragile and iridescent as foam-bubbles, the piled fruit in pierced silver baskets.

Everywhere a subdued richness, a delicacy, a fastidiousness, which affected her as subtly as some strange perfume might have done.

But through it all, as beneath all other sounds beat the incessant pulse of the sea, surged a sore sense of loss, of disappointment.

Some fragment of conversation recaptured her wandering thoughts—the echoing of the fatal word "to-morrow," but used in reference to other than herself.

"No, I'm not going until to-morrow," she heard Fenton say.

"You're not going away?" she cried quickly, almost turning the question into an assertion.

"I'm not going very far," he answered, with his slow smile.

"But why? But where?"

He ignored the first query and answered the second.

"I must go to look after my own small property."

"What will Arnot do without you?"

"He won't be obliged to do without me. I warn you that you'll be sick of the sight of me."

"Oh, no," interposed Mrs. Bagot, to whom man in general represented the universe and man in particular, as in the present instance, a straw to be snatched at by the drowning.

"Is your place far from this?" Titian asked.

"A crow-flight of five miles, six by the road. That means being almost in your pocket as distances go in the country."

"It's a pleasant surprise to find that you are so near a neighbour," said Mrs. Bagot. "Somebody, I forget who it was, said that you spent most of your time abroad."

"So I do."

"What a pity!" went on the gentle lady, pursuing her own train of thought.

"Why?"

"Oh, I was only thinking what a pity it is that you should spend your time in wandering over the globe when you might marry and settle down happily in this charming country-side."

With the cessation of her trickle of words came a pause. Not the dull heavy pause which sometimes checks and lies upon conversation, but a sharp-edged significant pause which held discomfort in its brief duration. Fenton suddenly ended it.

"I am married, and that is the reason why I do not settle down here."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Bagot, checked by something in his tone.

A suggestion of hidden tragedy rang through the terse announcement.

With her first conscious effort at social duty, Titian tried to rise to the occasion as hostess, saying, in a soft way which Fenton never forgot, how wise she thought he was to see as much of the world as he could.

Responsive to her effort, he became unusually conversational. He told them something about his hobby, bird photography, and how he pursued it in many strange and distant places.

Titian could associate patience but not energy with this big, rather lazy-looking man, and yet the recital of some of his adventures implied the possession of unusual vigour and endurance. She could still less associate tragedy with so slow and sleepy-eyed an individual, and yet—something beyond her ken had certainly rung in his tones, had flashed across his face for one lightning instant.

The leaves of the Book of Life were fluttering in her fingers, and the very first pages puzzled her.

So life at Camus had begun; and after a period of alternating reactions, day linked itself with day into an unending chain of routine.

First there had been the shock of her mother's death. One night in her sleep, Mrs. Bagot had slipped into the Great Shadow, never to return, and Titian had mourned her long and sorrowfully.

Then there had been the fluctuations of Arnot's health; until, growing physically stronger, he had emerged from the anxious stages to the settled monotony of invalidism. On fine days, he was wheeled on to the terrace which spread its paved length along the western and southern sides of the castle, or into the walled garden, where all sorts of semi-tropical plants and shrubs throve and flourished in the mild sea air. The high mossy walls gave no more indication of the treasures which they enclosed than did the grim weather-worn exterior of the castle.

Although motor-car and carriage were there for his pleasure, Arnot refused to go outside his own domain.

"If it is my Vatican," he said bitterly one day, "I reign absolutely here. I am not going out to be a raree-show for the country-side."

When visitors, few in that lonely place, called, he would not see them, and sent Titian alone to return the visits, which were rarely repeated.

"They only come out of curiosity," he said.

"They want to see what the wreck of a man is like, and what type of fool he married."

It was difficult to become used to such speeches, impossible to foresee what might evoke them.

Titian sometimes wondered, until her temples throbbed, where the lover of those magic weeks had gone? Why, if he cared at all for her then, should he repulse and gibe at her now? What could the quality of the love have been if it changed so woefully at the breath of calamity? She was the same Titian, only that now she was his wife. Was it marriage which had made the cruel alteration? she wondered innocently. She longed to be of use to him. She tried to serve him in all sorts of tentative pathetic ways.

Once, when after summoning up her courage she descended to the kitchen to make little dainties for him, and brought him the result, his thin laughter lashed her like a whip.

"My dear girl," he said, and the phrase held more of sarcasm than affection, "please understand that I infinitely prefer the skilled productions of a paid professional to the efforts of the unwary amateur, however well-intentioned."

"Mother used to like my creams," she faltered, wounded, but trying to be patient with him. "I thought——"

"I am not your lamented mother," he said, looking at her with his piercing gaze;—no flame now, but a rapier, seeking for opportunity to thrust. "What business have beautiful fools to think? Thinking's damnable. Damnable. You are better without thoughts. Thoughts are toll-free but not hell-free, curse them!"

"Why do you call me a fool so often?" she asked with a show of spirit, although her lips trembled. "It hurts, and I don't think I deserve it."

She remembered how his face had twisted, but his voice had not softened as he answered:

"Don't you think you've earned the title by marrying me?"

"I begin to think I have," she answered, wearing her pride until she had escaped from his scrutiny into the seclusion of her own room, where it fell from her like a dropped mantle, leaving unsheltered a bewildered and unhappy girl.

When the nurse had been dispensed with, certain duties had devolved upon her, but they were as few and as light as possible. Hammond became indispensable; Hammond, the thin-lipped, deft-handed attendant. Silent-footed, too, for, obeying childhood's admonition, he was generally seen before he was heard. Titian often wondered if he ever said anything but "yes" or "no"; but

concluded that he must talk to Arnot when she was not present, for sometimes her husband quoted him.

"Hammond says this, or Hammond says that."

If Arnot were monarch of his spray-blown realm, then assuredly Hammond was his Grand Vizier. Orders filtered through him. It was—"I have told Hammond; he will see to it." "Don't bother. Hammond will manage;—" until sometimes she had an odd fancy that it was Hammond who really held the reins, while Arnot only wielded the whip.

When Arnot had complained of her maid's incapacity, it was Hammond who found and produced Marshall, and it was the same in other emergencies. Hammond was always resourceful. If anything was wanted it was: "Ask Hammond." And to give him his due, Hammond rarely failed to rise to the occasion.

His devotion to his master was unstinted; he never spared himself day or night. Titian sometimes blamed herself for not liking him better.

On his bad days, Arnot could not endure her presence, and she spent long lonely hours in wandering about the cliffs or in striving to forget the unhappiness against which she daily fought, by

going down to the village and trying to make friends with the people.

By what strange magic had the accident distorted Arnot's feeling for her as well as his poor body? Sometimes he looked at her almost as if he hated her, while at other times his glance swept her with its old enveloping fire. But behind the fire burned something from which she instinctively shrank, and no knowledge, acquired or imparted, told her what it was.

In her cloistered upbringing, innocence had implied ignorance, and to shield that innocence at any cost had been her mother's dearest task. The consequence was that Titian Fleury at twenty was as ignorant of life and its meaning as Titian Bagot had been at thirteen.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PHASE PITILESS

THE period which had followed Fenton's first long absence showed kaleidoscopic in Titian's memory—a jumble of oddly-shaped, crudely-coloured reminiscences, violent in hue, and shaken continuously from one restless pattern to another, each angular and with points that pricked.

The time after his return seemed almost happy in contrast.

Arnot's tongue had never so sharp an edge in his cousin's presence, nor did the lambent fire of his sarcasm play so frequently about his wife. Sometimes Fenton wheeled him along the terrace and told fragmentary stories of his adventures with the camera; sometimes they halted by one of the carved stone benches, and Fenton would pull some little vellum-covered volume from his pocket and bid Titian read for a while.

Her voice was soft and pleasantly modulated, and, as she had often read for her mother, the task did not induce the self-consciousness of a novel effort.

Once Fenton had asked her to sing. She never forgot the incident.

"Your voice sounds so musical when you read," he said in his kindly way, "that I am sure you can sing. Can she, Arnot?"

"I don't know. I should think not," Arnot answered, smiling disagreeably.

Titian, anxious to please, responded rather uncertainly: "I can sing a little. I always used to sing in the choir at home."

She could almost hear the tang in Arnot's voice.

"Ah, the choir! Pray delight us, my dear."

A little shyly, but very simply and naturally, she lifted her head and sang an old-fashioned ditty, *Kirtle Red*, but before she was able to finish the second verse Arnot shrieked and put his fingers in his ears.

"No more music-murder, please."

She stopped abruptly, and looked away to sea, biting her lip to still its trembling. The onslaught had been so sudden, so cruel, that a slow tear forced its way down her averted face.

"I didn't know you were such a connoisseur,"

Fenton said sternly, as he got up and wheeled the chair farther along the terrace.

Arnot's words came back to her.

"But, my dear Fenty, her voice is like a bellows with the air escaping. Untaught. Horrible."

"I thought it was very soft and sweet."

"But you are no musician, my good cousin."

Titian thought she heard him ejaculate: "So much the better for me, perhaps!" but she could not be sure, and the episode had ended.

She had never sung again, save at the services at the squat-towered church, where she had a happy consciousness that God would not object to the huskiness of her voice if the spirit which rang through it were pure and true.

Arnot had at first laughed at her desire to go to church; then he had bidden her: "Go, by all means, if it amuses you, but don't let any parsons near me. I don't want any spiritual spring-cleaning at Camus."

"Don't you?" she had asked, and thought that his look answered her with a sharp scrutiny.

Truth to tell, in those days she puzzled him. He began to realise that she was not the simple fool he had taken her to be.

So she went twice to church every Sunday, and tried honestly to be "joyful in the Lord" when

circumstances seemed to offer but little occasion for rejoicing;—and she sang in due season, in her soft husky voice, the rapturous:

"Lift up your heads, O ye gates,
And be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors,
And the King of Glory shall come in.
Who is the King of Glory?
Even the Lord of Hosts,
He is the King of Glory,——"

and felt vaguely comforted.

Once she had touched upon the hidden tragedy of Fenton's life.

Arnot, after one of his visits, had been softened and reminiscent, and had spoken of his early boyhood, an unusual expansion for him.

"I was chucked on the world at an uncommonly early age. It made me a hard little beggar. Only for the Medes I might have gone to the bad altogether."

"How many of them were there?" Titian ventured to ask. As a rule, he resented being questioned.

"A little French family, Uncle Robert, Aunt Margaret, Fenton, and Mollie. Their place was the only home I ever knew. I used to go there for the holidays."

"Where are they now?"

"Scattered to the four winds of heaven," said Arnot hardly. "Uncle Robert broke his neck out hunting, Aunt Margaret died a few years after. Mollie is married and highly disapproves of me now, and Fenton dragged his anchor in his youth, and sails about from harbour to harbour."

"What happened to Fenton?"

"Ask him," said Arnot, his eyes on her face.

"He told us that he was married."

"The deuce he did!" Surprise sharpened his tones. "I didn't think he ever spoke of it."

"It was on the night we came here. He just said that he was married in answer to some remark of mother's. Is there a mystery about it? You might tell me, Arnot. I don't ask out of mere curiosity."

"Oh, don't you, Eve? Well, for once the apple is mine and I refuse to give you even a bite of it. It's a nasty sour apple, not good for little girls."

"If it were really sour I believe you'd give it to me just for the pleasure of setting my teeth on edge," she cried, exasperated.

"Very well, then. It's Dead Sea fruit and will turn to ashes in your mouth," he answered, sobering suddenly. "His wife is in a lunatic asylum. It's nothing to wag tongues about."

"To whom could I mention it, even if I had the opportunity?" she asked.

Since then she had felt a deep sympathy for Fenton, although he seemed to be quite happy and contented, and was the last person in the world with whom one would associate the tragedy of a broken life.

The days of his sojourning at Belfield were indeed red-letter days. When they fell in summer, he would sometimes take her sailing round the coast in his little yacht. Once or twice, on a blue summer day, a seal had followed them through the water, pushing up its shiny wet head, sniffing, and staring at them with its round black eyes, then suddenly diving out of sight, to reappear later as if in answer to Fenton's soft whistle.

Sometimes he took her across the cliffs to some far strand or cave to show her where he got some of his photographs of sea-birds. Once she got inside the artificial rock which concealed him and his camera, and which he was able day by day to push nearer and nearer to the unsuspecting birds. She thought it felt very hot and stuffy, and she wondered anew at his patience. He told her the names of the different gulls and sea-birds, only to find that she knew them as well as he did: gannets, guillemots, cormorants, kittiwakes, murrs, puffins,

terns, sea-crows, dunlins, curlews, sand-pipers, whimbrels. She remembered his face of astonishment when she had rattled them off, and how he had made her substantiate her claim to knowledge by pointing out to him each specimen as she recognised it.

It was she who had found the blue-tit's nest in the far wall of the garden, and had helped him to get some admirable pictures of the tiny shrill-sweet chirping family. It was she who had pointed out to him a gorged sparrow-hawk upon the gate-post of the courtyard, and enabled him to get what was, for him, a unique series of photographs. It was she who had found and shown him a special haunt of the black-backed gulls, great soaring creatures that looked as if a feather from the wing of night had fallen across the broad sweep of their wings.

But these good days were few and far between, for Arnot was jealous of Fenton's society and grudged the time he spent with Titian.

When Fenton came to Belfield in the winter, and the sea outside raged and crashed upon the rocks, and the wind howled around the castle and dimmed the windows with the salt spray, the trio in Arnot's room spent days of comparative peace. Arnot's nerves were always ready to be jarred, but

Fenton had a calming influence upon him. Some sudden whim prompted him to take up painting again. He had once sketched quite creditably in water-colours. Now the fancy took him to copy some of Fenton's bird-studies, and make what he called Japanese pictures of them. When Fenton objected to the elimination of one detail or the elaboration of another, or questioned the correctness of his colouring, Arnot only laughed, and said it was the effect that mattered and not accuracy.

Had Titian dared to comment, the lash of his tongue would have turned harmony to discord. Because she was untravelled and comparatively unlettered he gave her credit for neither intelligence nor knowledge, and he was all too prone to snub her tentative efforts at conversation.

Once or twice, after Fenton had gone and Arnot had dismissed her, when she sat in her own room brooding in the firelight, she wondered wistfully what a real home would have been like—the home of her girlish dreams? A home where—someone—would have loved and wanted her, would have been kind to her, would have taken little services from her. She tried to choke down the thought as being disloyal to Arnot, but the repression of her warm and tender impulses was a daily trial. Of

late, she had hoped that she was hardening, that she was growing not to mind so much.

Were most marriages like this? She wondered again and again.

Fenton's had come to shipwreck through no fault of his; her own was—yes, she was forced to admit it—a ghastly failure, a broken thing whose fragments wounded her sorely in the breaking. Did a calamity such as had befallen them of necessity kill love? She thought of her mother's quiet acceptance of her sorrow, and of her gradual fading out of life. Were men so utterly different from women? She knew so few for purposes of comparison.

Mr. Gerard, the Rector of Breston, an elderly bachelor, who had taught her what she knew of literature and the classics. A gentle quiet dreamer, ruled by his house-keeping sister and never happy unless book in hand. She could not picture him otherwise. The Reverend Mr. Martyn of Camus, a widower, of whom she knew little save that he read beautifully and that his sense of self-importance was so hurt by Arnot's attitude that he only spoke to her in platitudes.

Dr. Bailey, a ruddy cheerful little man who came occasionally to see Arnot.

Arnot said he had "glimmerings," whatever that

might mean, but he did not glimmer much to her. He generally told her that his patient was getting on nicely, very nicely indeed. He ejaculated, "Well, well, well!" or "My, my, my!" in answer to her laboured remarks, and usually rounded up his visit with a compliment either to her or to her flowers. She did not know what he was like at home: whether he cared for his wife or not; whether he made her happy or allowed her to do things for him. She only knew that she rather liked him, although she never quite knew what to say to him; and his cheery visits made a pleasant break in the monotony of her life.

Fenton Mede. Dear old Fenty! He could never be anything but kind. He was like a very nice uncle, she concluded. Of course she had never seen him in illness, but somehow she could not imagine that any trouble, no matter how devastating, would warp his nature as Arnot's seemed to have been warped since the accident.

*Seemed* to have been warped!

This reflection brought her up against an illuminating fact.

How much of the apparent perversion of his character was inherent, how much acquired? Like a flood, the realisation of her utter ignorance of Arnot's true nature overwhelmed her. What did

she know of the real character of the man whom she had married with such appalling thoughtlessness? What did she know of his life, his tastes, his habits, his pastimes, his vices, his virtues? Nothing, absolutely nothing. He was still as a sealed book to her. He had been an ardent wooer, a bewildering lover, but what had lain behind the golden love-mist? On what foundation had she built her flimsy dream-castle? She felt the quick-sands shifting.

More than once she had realised with a shock of bitterness that it was only for her beauty he cared, but now even that attribute, which she still owned in lovely abundance, failed to please. Sometimes he seemed to hate the very sight of her.

Her thoughts went round and round in their squirrel-cage with maddening persistence; there was not one amongst them untinged with the sharpness of regret.

One, a most bitter-sweet dream, came uppermost again and again. A tiny dream, a soft dream, the yearning dream of a dear impossibility, it beat against her heart with the longing insistence of little hands. Its little footfalls pattered through her thoughts like leaves through a wood; its little shadow fell wraith-like across her path,—poor tiny thwarted ghost of what might have been!

But these things were locked in the innermost recesses of her being; and she sometimes wondered wistfully if people noticed her love for little young things, or were aware of her lingering touch upon some curly head or rosy cheek in the village. In those days, the singing of the *Magnificat* used to give her a pang, and she wondered dully why no one had written a *Miserere* for the Mothers-who-might-have-been, who had not been found worthy to pass on the torch of life through the generations.

Then the housekeeper, Mrs. Brooke—who daily went through the solemn farce of coming to her for orders—pitying her youth and loneliness, had brought her a Persian kitten, a soft grey ball of fur and playfulness. No words could adequately express the joy which the little thing's companionship gave her. Youth bubbled afresh in her; in some odd way its presence strengthened her and enabled her to bear Arnot's nervous outbursts with renewed patience. She did not tell him of her treasure; he disliked animals, and took no interest in her doings, so she kept little Bibi away from his quarters.

One day, as she was playing with the kitten on the stairs, she heard the sharp trill of Arnot's bell. Fearing that he might need someone in a hurry, she

caught up Bibi hastily and fled along the corridor to his room.

"What is it, Arnot?"

"I want Hammond."

"Is it nothing that I can do for you?"

"Nothing. What's that?"

As she stood, flushed and breathless, at the end of his couch, the kitten's soft fur pressed against her cheek, the sight of her seemed to madden him inexplicably.

"This?" she answered, nestling closer to the little thing, and smiling as he had never seen her smile before. "This is Bibi, my precious little kitty."

"Damn you!" he burst forth violently. "How dare you bring your abominable animals into my room? How dare you come in here cooing, and smiling, and cuddling the little beast? As if I were not tormented enough without that! Go away. I'll have the brute drowned. Ah! thank God, here's Hammond. Hammond, see that that grey beast is drowned before night."

"Arnot!"

"I'm master here, I tell you," he almost snarled at her.

She remembered the way in which his lip had curled back from his teeth and how it had frightened her.

"The kitten is mine," she said, facing him like a thing at bay. "I will kill anyone who dares to touch it."

Then Arnot's anger had evaporated in laughter, a thin crackling laugh that held but little mirth.

"My God! you do look fine when you are in a passion," he cried, with an admiration which stung.

She looked at him for a full minute. Her gaze was fiercely concentrated upon his altered face; it neither wavered nor sank before his as it was wont to do, but shone with the flame of some intense feeling.

"Arnot, I think I hate you," she said at last, in a low voice.

Then she fled from the room.

An hour later, Fenton found her with the kitten in her arms, sobbing her heart out on one of the stone benches on the terrace.

It was late September, and the trails of creeper covered the wall behind her in a glory of rose, yellow and scarlet, emphasising by their fiery splendour the desolate curve of the crouched figure on the bench. The mists of twilight drew towards them from the sea.

Fenton sat down beside her and took one hand gently in his.

"What is it, Titian?" he asked kindly.

Lifting her swollen tear-blotched face she told him.

He was silent for a moment; then he asked unexpectedly:

"How old were you when you married Arnot?"

"Nineteen," she answered.

"You are a child no longer, then. You must be patient."

"Patient! Patient! I am sick of patience."

"It is hard on you, my dear," he continued slowly. "But you must realise how hard it is on Arnot too."

"It is no worse for him than for me," she broke out childishly.

"That's not a fact," said Fenton bluntly, "and in your heart you know it. You have your beautiful youth and health and strength. What has he? Think of what he was before his accident! Why, he was tingling with vitality! I never knew a chap who enjoyed life more than he did. To think of what he is now makes me want to swear at something."

"I know. I know. I'm a wretch to complain. I *am* sorry for him. I'd do anything to help him, if he'd only let me."

"Don't you see that he can't just yet? He's too sore. Think of his marriage, his hopes. You

can't know what it means to him—" He stopped abruptly.

"But Fenty, sometimes—sometimes he seems to hate me!"

"Oh, no, he doesn't," Fenton returned drily. "It's only the bitterness of his disappointment finding vent. You don't realise what it is to him, my dear. You don't understand, and I'm afraid I can't enlighten you."

"But——"

"My sympathy goes more to him than to you on this occasion," Fenton answered, looking at her curiously. Then his regard altered; melted into the old kind look. "Keep on playing the game, Titian. Believe me, it's worth while."

That had been one of Fenton's exasperating times—one of the very few, she was obliged in honesty to admit; but the incident had sown seeds of thought, and she tried to see Arnot's point of view from a new outlook.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PHASE AMOROUS

THEN followed a period which Titian never liked to recall: a period of passionate admiration, which seemed to spring, phœnix-like, from the ashes of Arnot's fiery outburst over the kitten.

He did not apologise: that was not his way; but one day soon after, when she was in his room, he dismissed Hammond with a nod, and called her to him.

As she stood beside his couch he took her hands and drew her closer.

"Kneel down beside me, you lovely thing," he whispered.

She knelt obediently, and his thin arms pressed her passionately to him. His kisses burned on her lips and throat and hair. His fierceness frightened her, and she shrank in his embrace. He felt her shrinking and strained her closer.

"Kiss me," he whispered again. "Kiss me as you ought to kiss me."

She touched his cheek gently with her lips. The suddenness of this fury of affection overwhelmed her. The unexpectedness of the demand after months of repulsion left her mentally a-gasp, and she felt that she could not respond at once to his desire. She stroked his hair timidly—the first caress she had dared to offer him since they came to Camus. He moved impatiently.

"Oh, you are cold. Cold. Half a man has no appeal for you. You have only pity for the wreck."

"No, Arnot. No, dear," she cried. "I love you. Indeed, I do."

He pushed her from him suddenly.

"Love! What do *you* know about love?" he cried. "You undeveloped fledgling thing! But if I can't teach you, by God, no one else shall."

"But Arnot, do teach me," she pleaded. "I am not really stupid. That is a lesson I could learn very easily. Only try."

But his fire spent itself with disquieting rapidity. He lay back on his cushions white and exhausted.

"What's the use?" he murmured. "What's the use of anything? Life is a devil's jest, a tragedy of errors. What does some old German chap call it, a short blossoming and a long withering. My God, my withering seems very long!"

"Arnot, my dear!"

"Oh, go away. I can't stand platitudes."

Then, as she went to the door, reluctant, discomfited, he called her back.

"Come here. Slip your sleeves up from your arms."

Hesitant for an instant, she obeyed him, blushing, and pushed the silken sleeves up as far as they would go, revealing soft dimpled curves and round white contours.

Arnot ran his thin hot fingers eagerly over their cool smoothness. He pressed his face against them; he drew one arm round his neck and kissed it. There was an avid hunger in his actions which accentuated the faint sense of repugnance that Titian had experienced before, but she tried to stifle it. He was her husband: why should she deny him this passing pleasure? There was so very little that she could do for him. She suffered him to caress and play with her bare arms, but still some inner instinct rebelled. When he closed his eyes, tired, she laid cool hands upon his forehead and softly stroked his hair. There was sheer joy in that, pure pleasure unexpectedly captured.

Suddenly he opened his eyes.

"I read somewhere of an old marquis who had a

lovely young wife—something like you, child, I expect. He had a room hung with black satin, and a black-satin-covered couch, and he used to make his wife sit naked on it, while he feasted on her beauty."

Titian reddened. "Horrible old man!"

"I should like to do that with you," said Arnot very low.

She sprang away from him, aflame from head to foot. Shame scorched her; all her modesty felt outraged at his words. She hastily pulled down her sleeves, feeling degraded.

Arnot laughed. "Oh, I'm not going to force you to do it against your will."

"Arnot!" she cried, in a choked voice.

"If you really cared for me you would do anything to please me."

"Arnot!"

"You really are rather like a doll that can only say 'Mamma' and 'Papa.' You needn't get into such a panic. I'm not going to undress my doll to-day."

The hot mocking eyes, the jeering tones killed her new-born tenderness and roused a passion fierce as his.

"Arnot, don't make me hate you," she cried hoarsely.

"The charming variations of the eternal feminine!" His voice flicked her as if indeed she stood naked before him.

A wave of burning resentment rushed over her, and flamed in her eyes. He read it in her gaze and answered it with a crackle of laughter.

Quivering with shame she rushed from the room, and did not enter it again until he sent for her some days later.

Reluctantly she went at Hammond's summons.

By Arnot's couch lay a handsome red setter, who beat the floor with feathery chestnut tail at her approach.

"I am one who loves that beauty should go beautifully," Arnot quoted, as carelessly as if continuing some former conversation.

She shrank from meeting his eyes; she still felt oddly shamed.

"Yes," she answered, without looking at him. "You sent for me?"

"I want you to take charge of this fellow for me. He matches your hair to perfection."

"You mean?"

For answer he made the dog rise to his feet, and pointed to his silver-mounted collar.

Titian bent to look at it.

"I, Rufus, belong to Mrs. Fleury of Camus," was engraved upon it. She flushed faintly. Was it a peace-offering? A sudden memory of Fenton's words urged her to more gracious response.

"He is for me?" she asked. "Thank you very much. He is a beauty."

"Like to like," said Arnot, with an odd little glance at her. "Take care of him when you are out on the cliffs, for if my devil has entered into him he may rush down a steep place violently into the sea!"

"Has he?" she half-whispered.

"Perhaps. For the moment, at any rate. You are safe for to-day, pretty prude. Shed the light of your countenance on me for awhile. Sit there, where I can see you."

"Do you really want me, Arnot?"

"I shouldn't ask you if I did not. You are a delight to the eye. Let's play the little comedy of Tantalus."

But when she brought a chair to the end of the couch, and sat with one hand on Rufus's silky head, he closed his eyes on their avowed delight, and lay for a long while motionless, with thin lines of pain drawn about his clear-cut lips.

From that time he had given vent to an extrava-

gant delight in her beauty, though he never repeated the suggestion which had so shocked her modesty. It was then that he first evinced dissatisfaction with her maid; from that epoch dated Marshall's reign. He sent to Paris for designs for gowns for her; he had her attired in all that was rare and exquisite for his delectation. He amused himself by designing unusual jewels for her to wear, and spent hours in comparing the rival charms of plaque or necklace against her snowy skin.

He had her hair done in different ways to see which pleased him best. One would think that the fate of empires depended on the choice of fillet or aigrette, so long did he take over the selection. He was like some miser gloating over his treasure in secret.

Though Titian liked the gowns and jewels well enough, all her womanhood revolted against the incessant bedecking and parading. She sometimes thought bitterly that she was indeed the doll to which he had compared her, a toy to be adorned and made look beautiful; not the wife and comrade that she might have been to the warped rebellious creature. He never cared to probe below the surface save when he wished to wound; she felt that she was no more to him than is a beautiful odalisque

to the lord of the harem, and her pride revolted from the thought.

Still she tried to play the game, hard though it was: to remember his affliction, his limitations. She endured his fierce but fluctuating outbursts of passion to which nothing in her nature responded, as she endured his exploitation of her charms, with a sense of shamed passivity. When the fleeting years awoke in him the fear of her youth's passing, and with it her beauty, she sat and listened with numb acquiescence to endless discussions between him and Marshall as to the claims to superiority of this face-cream or that, this system of massage or the other, the advisability of trying electric vibrations, the best tincture for keeping the glory of her hair undiminished.

What did it matter? In a very few years all her looks would vanish irrevocably, while the soul, the personality, the essential Titian, the only thing that really mattered was being slowly stifled, slowly atrophied.

It seemed to her as if the circles which the Stone of Calamity had started when cast into the pool of her life, had grown wider and wider until they now reached its edge and ceased to disturb the placid surface. The pool had become tranquil, even stagnant, when one day Arnot was overwhelmed

by the horrible possibility of her becoming fat! He thought that he detected a richer generosity of outline, a fuller amplitude of curve, and the thought worried him almost to frenzy.

As usual, it was Hammond who supplied the solution of the difficulty. He suggested fencing lessons for his mistress, in the longest speech which Titian had ever heard him make.

"Mr. Mede can teach Mrs. Fleury when he is at Belfield, sir, and she can practise with me, if you wish, when he is away."

"Why, Hammond, can you fence?"

"After a fashion, sir."

"Invaluable creature!"

So the fencing lessons had begun, with the result that the new interest and the additional exercises aroused Titian from her clogging apathy.

Fenton was a skilled fencer, and Titian made an apt pupil.

The piquancy of the contrast between the graceful figure in its black satin fencing-suit and the flushed lovely face above it gave a new savour to Arnot's pride of the eye; and he often urged them to fresh displays long after they had had enough.

Hammond, too, had a neat way with the foils, but the practice with him only held the zest of

trying to excel him, which, to her chagrin, Titian could never succeed in doing.

Thus the days had woven their endless chain until the hand of Death suddenly clove the links asunder.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PHASE FORLORN

A TAP at the door was followed by the entrance of Marshall full of discreetly subdued excitement.

"The doctor and Mr. Mede are here, madam," she announced.

"Are they?" asked Titian dully, sitting up in bed, and looking at the woman as if she did not really see her.

"And the doctor wants to know if you would care to see him."

"No, oh, no. Why should I see him? I am quite well."

"He thought perhaps you might like to know about Mr. Fleury. Hammond says it is only what was to be expected. A clot——"

"Please don't, Marshall."

"Then I am to tell Dr. Bailey that you don't want to see him, madam?"

"No, I don't want to see him. I needn't, need

I?" She felt lost, bewildered; as if she were in some new plane of being that was neither past nor present.

"Mr. Mede will attend to everything that is necessary, he says," Marshall returned. "He desired me to ask you if you would like to see him presently. He will wait your convenience, he says."

"Yes. I think I should like to see him. Oh, yes. Please ask him to wait. I'll get up now. Get my bath ready, Marshall."

Marshall vanished into the bathroom with the air of one who considered it slightly indecorous for a newly-made widow to think of having a bath. Some dim Eastern analogy of smitten breast and ash-strewn head floated through her mind as being an attitude more appropriate to the occasion.

Titian gave a little shudder when she saw that Marshall had laid out a black frock for her to wear. It almost seemed as if the woman had been prepared for all the horrible staging of death.

Arnot was dead, and she was a widow. Arnot had lived and she had been his wife. But in her inmost heart she knew that she was no more a widow than she had been a wife.

Suddenly, Marshall and her conventionalities seemed to smother her like the black gown which

the maid was slowly slipping over her shoulders. She felt that she wanted to scream as she emerged from its folds.

Arnot had ordered the dress as an experiment. He had wanted to see how a black gown would look with her platinum chain and plaque set with emeralds. He had not liked it; she had only worn it once. What would he say—? But how could she think of such trivialities? Arnot had done with such things. He cared no longer. He knew better now, she thought, and then wondered if she were irreverent. She could not think of him as being in an orthodox Heaven; she would not imagine him in an orthodox Hell. In one irresistible flash of thought, of which afterwards she felt hotly ashamed, she pictured him as being happiest in the Mahometan Garden of Paradise surrounded by lovely houris.

Her thoughts wandered irrelevantly.

As Marshall fastened her gown, the window-blind nearest to her flapped inward and hung suspended over the back of a chair. Through the revealing space she saw the sea, which looked unbelievably blue after the artificial gloom of the room. White-crisped waves broke with a curling hiss over a rock on which a seagull was perched, and swayed its fringing seaweed. When one wave bigger than

the rest rushed towards the bird, she thought absurdly, for a moment, of how wet the seagull's feet would get. Then she laughed aloud at the thought.

The sight of Marshall's face in the glass sobered her instantly.

"Would you like me to get you some sal volatile, madam?" she inquired primly.

Titian shook her head, while Marshall murmured something about "nerves" and "the shock."

"I am all right," she said a little impatiently.

"*Now*," added Marshall, saving the situation in her own eyes.

When she entered her sitting-room, which bore the forlorn aspect induced by drawn blinds in daylight, Fenton rose from the couch and came towards her with outstretched hands.

He said nothing, but his face looked rather pale in the unnatural light. She put her hands into his, and stood for a moment looking at him. Then trembling seized her, and her lips quivered.

"Oh, Fenty!" she said. And again—"Oh, Fenty!"

She broke into uncontrollable sobbing as Fenton put his arm gently round her, and led her to the couch.

"Poor child," he said softly. "Dear child. I am so sorry."

As if she were indeed the child he called her in his pity, she turned and buried her face in the rough tweed of his coat, crying and clinging to him as if she would never let him go. The touch of warm humanity was sufficient to unlock the sluice-gates of her emotion. His kindness and the sense of contact emphasised and yet mitigated her loneliness as Marshall's aloofness had failed to do; and the flood of tears washed away the bitterness of her retrospect and loosed the grip of the nervous shock. Fenton did nothing to check it for a time.

"Have you got a handkerchief?" he asked at last, in some embarrassment.

"N—no," she sobbed. "I haven't even got a pocket." Then she lifted her head and gave a queer, choked laugh. "Oh, Fenty, how ludicrous it seems that you should ask me if I have a handkerchief! I wonder that Marshall forgot to provide me with such an appropriate accessory."

"Here's mine," said Fenton, unfolding a white silk one and putting it into her hand.

He looked at her pityingly. He did not quite know what to say to her. Conventional sympathy if he could ever offer it, was out of place here. And yet, what a deep spring of sympathy welled

within him for the lonely creature beside him! The black dress changed her, he thought. It seemed to accentuate her pathetic appeal.

"Dear Fenty, you are so nice and human," she said, drying her eyes and trying to suppress her sobs. "I am so glad you have come. I was frightfully lonely. Marshall is so aloof and disapproving. She is acting according to some code of regulations of her own, and she expects me to do likewise. But I don't quite know what is expected of me, and I'm not sure that I should do it if I did. I can't mourn conventionally. I needn't, need I, Fenty?"

To this outburst Fenton answered never a word. He only patted the hand which lay in her lap near him, noting two things as he did so, its whiteness against the black gown and the gleam of the wedding-ring on its third finger.

"I am sorry. You believe I'm sorry?" she continued feverishly, as if speech must flow regardless of response. "It's simply that it all seems unbelievable, impossible. Yesterday and the day before and weeks ago the same things happened, the same routine went on. Last night he was just as usual, and to-day! Oh, I can't believe it, Fenty."

"It's true enough, child," said Fenton.

"But there was no warning? Could we have done nothing to guard against it?"

"Would you have wished to guard against it? Would he have wished to guard against it?"

"I—don't think so," said Titian, nervously rolling the handkerchief into a wet ball. "But do you think he wanted anything? Was there nothing we could have done for him? That thought has been haunting me."

"Lay its ghost once and for all," Fenton returned. "Arnot died in his sleep, painlessly, peacefully. As he would have wished. As anyone who cared for him would have wished if they could have chosen."

In the silence that followed, her eyes sought the direction of his, which were still held by the gleam of that emblematical gold band.

Flushing, she looked up suddenly.

"I did play the game, didn't I, Fenty?"

He pressed the hand that bore the wedding-ring.

"You played it like a man, Titian," he answered.

Through her pleasure at his response pricked a half-amused wonder at the form of it.

"I suppose it would never do to say I played it like a woman," she said. Then giving his arm a quick little squeeze, she cried, "Oh, Fenty, you *are*

so nice and human! You are such a big warm thing in a huge cold world. Don't leave me all alone here with Marshall."

Her tears flowed afresh, but she tried to check them.

Again his heart swelled with pity for her.

"Have you no relations of your own, Titian? No one you would like to send for?"

She shook her head. "My mother was an only child. My father's relations never forgave him for marrying her. He jilted an heiress for her sake, and they ran away together. No, I don't think I have a single relation in the world."

"Have you no woman friend, then? You should have someone with you."

"I haven't been able to make friends here, as you know, Fenty. Arnot didn't encourage people, and they soon dropped us. I have lived a sort of hermit's life for the last ten years."

"I know. I know. Poor child!" For a moment his loyalty to the dead gave way, and he thought bitterly of Arnot's selfishness.

"Had you no friends at Breston?"

"There were only the Gerards. Perhaps Miss Gerard would come to me if you thought I ought to have someone, but I don't think she'd be happy here. She is always bustling about the Rectory

at home—" The old word slipped out unconsciously. "She would have nothing to do here."

"She would be a woman in the house with you, at any rate, and not a fish, like Marshall. Besides, she could help you to see about things. Women——"

"Please don't be conventional, Fenty. I couldn't bear it. Things, indeed! No doubt Marshall will see that I am suitably attired for any and every occasion. Oh!" she cried, rising with sudden passion. "How I hate and detest the very name of clothes!"

Fenton looked at her with some surprise. To the outward eye life had flowed through Camus of late years with a deceptively calm placidity. He had no idea of the rebellions and humiliations which had seethed below the apparently tranquil surface.

"I thought that all women——" he began, puzzled.

"You've no right to think anything about all women, or any women," she broke forth. "Women are as different as—as dogs. You've no right to generalise."

"I never meant to——"

"No, I'm sure you didn't. You must forgive me, Fenty. I'm unstrung to-day. Everything seems so strange. I don't think that you are the

sort of man who looks upon a woman merely as a beautiful doll to play with and bedeck." Then she stopped and looked at him with quick scrutiny. "Or are you?"

"No, I'm not," he answered bluntly.

Titian looked away and pushed back her hair from her forehead.

It was an unconscious trick which Fenton had often noticed. He liked the curve of her white fingers as they thrust back the wave of hair, and he liked the way the tress fell back into place, spraying a little over her forehead. He had sometimes wondered why Arnot had not made her self-conscious by commenting upon it. Perhaps it counted to him for righteousness that he had not done so.

"Would you like me to telegraph for Miss Gerard?" he asked, after a pause.

"If you think it would be best," she answered passively.

"Did Arnot ever tell you anything about his affairs?"

She shook her head.

"Did he tell you that he had asked me to act as your trustee?"

"No."

"Do you know what a trustee is?"

She shook her head again. Then, with a smile which irradiated her tear-stained face, she said: "If it means a person whom one can trust it is a very appropriate thing for you to be, Fenty."

Fenton got up and walked to the window before he answered. Then he came back.

"That's as good a definition as you can get in this instance," he said, rather huskily. "Do you think that you can trust me, Titian?"

"Of course I can," she cried warmly. "Why, Fenty, I always look on you as a sort of uncle!"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CONQUERING OF ALL PHASES

TO be regarded as the uncle of a young and beautiful woman may have its advantages, but, to a man who can boast only nine years' seniority, the implication of such advanced age is scarcely complimentary. Fenton was taken aback.

"Had we not better say cousin?" he suggested. "That is the real relationship."

"Just as you like," she assented. "You are so steady, and so entirely dependable. You are like a big rock, no, a great tree, for I think you could shelter one from heat as well as from rain."

He felt touched at her outspoken confidence in him.

"I am glad that you feel like that. I hope you will always do so," he returned gravely. "At all times I shall be ready to serve you. You must never hesitate to call on me. If you give me Miss Gerard's address I'll write out the wire for her."

"The Rectory, Breston. You'll find forms in my desk."

He went over to the desk and hastily wrote a couple of telegrams; then turned to Titian.

"I've sent one also to my sister Mollie—Lady Tempest. I wish she was at home. She would come to you, I am sure."

A wave of loyalty surged up in Titian. "She never came while Arnot was alive. Why should she come now?"

Fenton looked rather embarrassed.

"She and Arnot had a—a misunderstanding, I believe. They were once very good friends. In the old days they were regular chums. Mollie was a year younger than Arnot. They did everything together. They used to bully me dreadfully."

"Why did you let them?"

"It was a case of two against one, and I was three years younger than Mollie."

"Three years younger!" cried Titian, making a rapid calculation with the tips of her fingers against the chintz of the couch. "Why that makes you four years younger than Arnot, and only nine years older than I am!"

"Even so, most sapient mathematician."

"I never was so surprised in my life. I thought that you were years older than Arnot. It must be

your beard. Why did you grow a beard when you were so young, Fenty?"

"Laziness," he answered laconically.

"Do you know why Arnot and your sister quarrelled?"

"Yes." The curt affirmative gave no promise of further enlightenment, and seemed to clang a door in Titian's face.

"Oh," she said dubiously. "I suppose I mustn't ask questions."

"If you say that you suppose that I mustn't answer them it would be nearer the mark," said Fenton, rising.

Titian clutched at the corner of the couch in a sudden tremor.

"Fenty, you're not going. Don't go. Don't leave me."

"I'm only going to ring for someone to take these wires." He looked compassionately at her as he went towards the bell. "I'll stay as long as you want me."

"Just let me see you. Let me know you are there," she went on, speaking quickly. "Talk if you can. Don't if it's too much of an effort, but just let me feel that there's a human being somewhere near me whom I can touch if I want to. I daresay you think me very callous and queer to

talk about anything and everything as I have been doing. To be able to laugh, even. I daresay it is. But down underneath is the consciousness of that icy fact, and all my words and thoughts come trooping, hurrying by, to try to pretend that it's not there. Do you understand, Fenty? Do you, I wonder? Even the least little bit?"

She gazed up at him. Her eyes looked dark and wild in the pallor of her face. Fenton sat down beside her, and took her nervously-working hands in his.

"I understand that you have had a great shock, my dear," he said quietly. "It will take some time for your nerves to readjust themselves. That is why I think you ought to have a woman with you. Should you have got up?"

"I couldn't stay in bed," she cried. "I did nothing but think and think. All the horrid things, all the bitter things, all the humiliating things, came thronging into my mind. It was ghastly." She shuddered. "Why couldn't I think nice things, Fenty? Why have I no happy or beautiful memories like other people? Why should I feel nothing but this underlying sick terror?"

"Poor child. Poor child," he said soothingly.

Silence fell, while Fenton strove to find words that might bring comfort. At last he said:

"Titian, I think there is one thing which might allay that terror."

She looked at him quickly, nervously. In her inmost heart she knew what he was going to suggest, but she shrank inexpressibly from hearing it put into words.

"To this house Death has come only as a friend," said Fenton slowly. "The bringer of rest. First to your mother, now to Arnot." He hesitated for a moment, then continued: "Will you come with me to see him?"

She shrank back into the corner of the couch, and pulled her hands from his.

"No. Oh, no. I couldn't. Don't ask me. I don't believe I could."

"There is nothing to frighten you; nothing to repel," he said quietly.

"I—" she began, then stopped, with her eyes fixed on him in a desperate appeal of which she yet felt half-ashamed. A lump rose in her throat; she felt as if it would choke her.

"I won't urge you to come if you would rather not, but I think it would do you good," he persisted gently.

She knew that he was right, but could not bring herself to consent. As she looked at the big quiet figure on the couch near her, some subtle strength

seemed to emanate from him to her. It was as if spirit touched spirit with friendly invigorating contact; as if his sympathy tried to instil some of his own calm into her wavering tormented mind.

Speech at all times was difficult to Fenton Mede, but speech about the deeper intimacies of life was almost impossible. Yet he felt that at all costs his slow tongue must be untied, his reticence conquered, if he were to help this troubled creature who leaned upon him, who trusted him so absolutely in her forlornness.

At last, with a visible effort, he forced speech halting with frequent shy pauses:

"I suppose there's always a—a sort of war between what—we are, and—and what we might be. St. Paul's old fight, the flesh and the spirit. Well—Arnot's spirit has—has dropped the burden of the flesh—found it too heavy to carry any longer. It's at rest, the poor body, and—and, Titian—the marks of—of the fight have been rubbed out. He looks the—the Arnot that he might have been. He—looks as if the best of him had triumphed, somehow. If you'd only come and see for yourself I think it would comfort you as nothing else could."

He stopped. Titian could see something of

what the effort had cost him, and she felt oddly touched. To-day the veil which had enwrapped her life of late years had been rudely torn asunder. She was face to face with real things now.

With a sigh that was half a strangled sob, she rose and walked over to the window.

Fenton watched her, wondering.

She raised a corner of the blind and looked out across the terrace and the bay. A gust of wind eddied the fallen red leaves along the pavement, and set them dancing and whirling over the low parapet into the water beneath. The church tower caught her eyes and held them for a moment, while a tangle of thoughts rushed through her mind, blown as swiftly as the leaves before the wind. Suddenly, her gaze fell on a white house near the church. In an upper window used to sit a young girl who was dying of consumption. Titian had gone to see her until Arnot had discovered and forbidden the visits.

To-day that upper blind was drawn. Then poor Agatha had got her order of release. Surely to her also Death had come as a friend.

Fenton's efforts had not been in vain. His halting words had touched the right chord. The real Titian was still alive; her finer sensibilities were not atrophied.

She turned from the window with a softened look upon her face.

"I will come with you, Fenty," she said. "I should like to think that Arnot is really happy."

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LAST FLICK

WHEN all that was mortal of Arnot Fleury had been laid to rest, the question of the future loomed portentously before Titian; yet under its shadow she moved as one who is half asleep.

The coming of Miss Gerard, welcome though it was, brought no sense of inner companionship, nor had she seen Fenton again from the day when he had led her, smitten to stillness, from the silent chamber of death, until they came face to face in the library to hear the reading of Arnot's will.

It was a brief document. With the exception of legacies to Hammond and Marshall—"because they knew how to carry out instructions,"—he left all that he possessed "to my wife Letitia, or Titian Fleury, because her beauty never failed me."

Fenton noted her start and flush as "our Mr. Robert Bourne" of Messrs. Bourne, Bourne & Gleed, read the clause aloud in dry legal tones;

but beyond that brief involuntary betrayal no further sign of emotion escaped her.

When Fenton had seen Mr. Bourne off in the motor he caught sight of Miss Gerard walking on the terrace and went to join her.

It was a still grey day. The sea spread calm and silvery towards the misty horizon. Here and there a russet-sailed fishing-boat lay dark upon its surface. From a rift in the clouds a hidden sun sent shafts of light raying downwards to touch the shimmering water to bands of coppery brightness.

Miss Gerard turned with alacrity when she heard Fenton's steps on the flags behind her.

"I am glad of this opportunity of a talk with you Mr. Mede," she said briskly. "I am rather anxious about Titian. She seems to me to be half-dazed. She must be roused. She must be awakened to a sense of her position and her responsibilities."

Miss Emily Gerard was a neat spare woman of about fifty, with smooth brown hair, quick grey eyes, a bright fixed colour, and a mind which never wavered in coming to a decision. Having made up her brother's mind for him upon every subject save literature (and one other) for nearly forty years, she conceived herself to be capable of grappling with any situation, however complex.

"People invariably make their own difficulties," she was fond of saying. "If there's a way in, there must be a way out."

Fenton felt that such a quality of mind might be of inestimable benefit to Titian in her present forlorn condition.

"How do you propose to rouse her?" he asked with interest. "Have you any definite suggestion to make?"

There was no hesitance about Miss Gerard's answer.

"I have a piece of news that will surprise her greatly—aye, and shock her too! I haven't mentioned it to her yet, as I did not like to obtrude my own affairs upon her."

"Is it permitted to ask the nature of the news?"

"It is," replied Miss Gerard bluntly. She paused for a moment; then went on, with heightened colour and eyes so bright that they almost seemed to snap sparks: "It ought to be no news to any woman that a man is going to make a fool of himself, and yet, I must say that I was completely taken aback."

She stopped again, and Fenton glanced at her with a look compact of curiosity and amusement.

"'Tis a true saying that a fool will always find a

greater fool to admire him, but how anyone could see anything to admire in my brother Baldwin I can't imagine. He's a regular gomeril about everything except his books."

Light began to dawn upon Fenton.

"Who is the lady?" he inquired politely.

"Lady? She's not a lady!" sniffed Miss Gerard. "That's the worst feature of a disgusting case. She's the new village school-mistress, a designing minx!"

"Is Mr. Gerard going to marry her?"

"I believe so," returned Miss Gerard in a hard voice, looking out to sea. "He says she is the only woman he has ever met who knew anything about Greek epigrams. Greek epigrams, indeed! I believe she just cribbed them all out of some old book in order to blind the poor gullible creature. Will Greek epigrams darn his stockings or see that he has a decent dinner, aye, and eats it too, for he's very apt to forget it?"

"Is there a disparity?" Fenton ventured.

"Disparity?" retorted Miss Gerard. "A mild word, indeed! He's thirty years older than she is. A whole generation between them! What does she know about domestic economy, except to teach it out of silly little books? Maybe she'll find it easier to marry than to housekeep! Now, do you

think that's bombshell enough to rouse Titian?" she added, turning sharply to him.

"I should think it would be," he replied, suppressing a smile, because he felt that a very real pain underlay Miss Gerard's vehemence.

Anything that was hurt or halt or maimed made instant appeal to him, and he divined the sore resentment at being so easily cast aside for a strange woman that burned through her commentary on mankind in general.

"I don't wish to seem intrusive," Fenton continued. "But am I to infer from what you have just told me that you are now free to come and go as you wish?"

"Yes," she answered, her lips tightening. "If you call it freedom to be suddenly cast aside by the person you care most for, and forced to stand with tied hands while you see him drifting to destruction."

"It may not be as bad as that. Such marriages sometimes turn out quite happily. If people have tastes in common——"

Miss Gerard turned to wither him with a glance.

"Tastes in common!" she cried. "I wonder how soon they'll come to the end of the Greek epigrams, and what they'll find when they get there?"

"One never knows," returned Fenton, looking at his watch. "I should like to see Titian before I go."

"Aren't you going to stay to tea?" Miss Gerard asked, clinging to his presence in the lonely house as Mrs. Bagot had clung so many years ago.

"I don't think so," he answered. "Not unless Titian specially wants me."

"I think she must be in her own room. Shall I see?"

"No, thank you. I'll find her for myself. It would be a pity to bring you in."

As he walked along the terrace, his thoughts turned to the news which Miss Gerard had told him. Surely the marriage of the Reverend Baldwin Gerard had been providentially arranged! In his inmost heart he blessed the happy inspiration which had led the prospective bride to bait her nets with Greek epigrams. He forgot Miss Gerard's pain in the pleasure that he felt at the thought that Fate had, at the psychological moment, provided the very person best fitted to look after Titian.

He felt a sense of responsibility towards her. Of her true capabilities he knew but little. She had led a life of such cloistered seclusion that he was unaware of what potentialities had been

nipped in budtime or what were still capable of coming to fruitage. All that he knew of her was sweet and womanly. Still, he felt dimly that there must be unnoted possibilities hidden beneath the surface.

She was sitting in her favourite corner of the couch; a pathetic, black-robed figure against the burnt-rose cushions, with Rufus's silky head on her knee. She was bending over the dog as he entered the room, stroking and pulling his smooth ears. She looked up quickly at Fenton's approach There were dark shadows beneath her eyes.

"Ah, Fenty, I am glad to see you," she said. "I've been hoping that you would come, ever since I heard the car go away."

"Why didn't you send for me?" he asked. "I thought you didn't want to be bothered."

"I don't believe that you could ever bother me," she answered, with a little smile. Then she drooped her head and bent once more over the dog.

As he looked at her he noticed a sudden indefinable change. Even to himself he could not tell in what it lay, whether in poise, manner, or expression. Her face was wistfully lovely in its unusual pallor; her shadowed eyes held their old childish appeal; the little hinted dimple still lurked at the corner of her mouth. It was the same and yet not

altogether the same Titian who had clung to him so piteously at their last meeting. Where was the change? The query pricked him.

"I have wanted to talk to you, Fenty," the soft voice went on. "I have wanted to ask you things about myself—my position."

"I suppose you know that you are what the world would call a rich woman," said Fenton slowly.

"Am I?"

"Camus Castle belongs to you and, roughly speaking, about £10,000 a year."

"I suppose that's a good deal."

"A comfortable income," returned Fenton drily.

"How much a year have you got, Fenty?"

"Not quite a fifth of that."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about money," she went on, stroking the dog's ruddy head. "I never had the spending of any until mother's money came to me."

"How much was that?" asked Fenton in his turn.

"About a hundred a year," she answered.

"Was that what you had to live on before you married?"

"I suppose so. I never asked. I never both-

ered about money. I was a child, a baby, an absolute idiot," she broke out suddenly. "I suppose I'm little better now."

"Did Arnot give you no allowance?"

"No, he paid for everything I had himself. He said that I did not need money, that I should not know how to use it. True, perhaps, then. But now I have to use it and I don't know how."

Fenton was aware of some straining turbulence tightly leashed by the quiet figure on the couch beside him.

"You will soon learn," he said gently.

"Yes, I suppose there's not much art in spending money," she said a little bitterly. "Arnot spent it like water on my dresses and my jewels."

"He was one who 'loved that beauty should go beautifully,'" Fenton returned.

"Oh, don't quote that to me, Fenton!" she cried, with sudden vehemence, striking the end of the couch with her hand. "If you could only guess how sick, how shamed that quotation makes me feel! It was Arnot's justification for everything. Oh, how he has humiliated me! Even in his will—" She covered her face with her hands. Hot tears trickled through her fingers.

"Titian! My dear child."

"Oh, don't touch me, don't come near me," she

cried, wildly. "You don't know what I've been for the last few years. A doll, a toy, a whim! An atrophying soul, whose only beauty lay in the flesh that clothed it. Every day, in every way, he made me feel that it was only for my body that he cared." She stopped abruptly.

"I never knew," Fenton faltered.

"How could you? It's not likely that he would have exploited such ideas to you. I was shamed enough without that. Every decent impulse in me he tried to check. Every bit of the real me he tried to stifle. Everything that was natural and human he strove to kill, while my hateful body was massaged and creamed and exercised in order to keep its beauty a delight for his eyes. I bore it while he was alive. Right or wrong, I thought it was my duty. He was fond of saying that many women would sell themselves for such clothes and jewels as mine. If I had sold myself I should not have felt half so humiliated. But I didn't, Fenty." Her voice trailed into a sob. "I married him for love—for love which he did his best to kill. He might have spared me after death. He might! He might! I can't forgive him for putting that in his will." She broke into piteous sobbing.

It was a revelation to Fenton. Hot anger

surged within him as he thought of the years of hidden suffering which she had endured so bravely; suffering less easily borne by a proud spirit than tangible, curable pain.

"To shame me before everyone," she sobbed. "It was too cruel."

"Listen, Titian. Listen," he said, gently insistent. "You were not shamed. Nobody thought anything of that clause except yourself. It conveyed nothing to me except——"

"Except what?" she asked, sitting up and looking at him as if she would read his very soul.

"Except—well, a rather exotic appreciation of you," he answered reluctantly. "You must rid your mind of such thoughts, child. You must wipe them away as you would off a slate."

"They were not written with slate pencil," she said very low. "They were burned in, Fenty."

"Well, turn over a new leaf, then, and start afresh. I know how easy it is to say these things, and how it is cruelly hard to do them. I, too—" He stopped abruptly.

Titian turned away; a few shining drops fell on the dog's head. Then she whispered:

"Do you really think they didn't understand? Miss Em and Mr. Bourne?"

"I'm quite sure they didn't."

"You didn't yourself? Honour bright?"

"Honour bright," he answered, a little huskily. "Not till you told me. Look here, Titian," he continued, with difficulty, "you don't mind my knowing, do you?"

She shook her head. "But you're the only person. I couldn't bear it if anyone else knew, but—somehow—I think I'm glad you do."

Fenton got up and paced about the room for a moment or two, coming at last to a halt before her.

"Titian!"

She looked up hastily at the strained sound in his voice.

"It's only that—I—honour you above all women, if it's any satisfaction to you to know it. I—oh, I can't say things, but you understand, child, don't you?"

"I understand that you are always good to me, dear Fenty," she said, smiling through her tears. Then she caught the hand that hung by his side and gave it a quick little kiss.

Fenton disengaged it, and turned suddenly away. When he found voice it was in tones which were drained of all emotion.

"Now I think it is time for us to map out your

tour of the world," he said, with determined lightness.

"My tour of the world? Oh, Fenty!" she cried, a new light dawning in her eyes.

# BOOK II

## CHAPTER I

### THE CITY OF BELLS

"COMMON sense," remarked Miss Emily Gerard, "is so called because it ought to be common, not because it is!"

"It's an admirable virtue, Miss Em," returned Titian lazily.

"Why don't you try to cultivate it, then?"

"How can you have the heart to ask me to do anything so strenuous as to cultivate a virtue in this *dolce far niente* place?" asked Titian, changing her position for a more comfortable one.

The two were sitting on one of the curved mosaic seats in the garden beneath the broad plateau of the Piazzale Michelangelo.

Behind them, in the centre of the Piazzale, young David in bronze, sling in hand, poised dark against a luminous sky. Above and to their left the gold and marbles of the old church of San

Miniato glittered in the setting sun. Beneath them the avenue of cypresses, up which the Merciful Knight had trodden the way of redemption, quivered in the sunlight like black flames.

At their feet lay Florence, whose plain of red-roofed houses was broken here and there by soaring tower or campanile or the bubble of church dome. The Arno, a glittering ribbon of gold, threaded its way through the tangle of buildings to the haze-dimmed trees of the Cascine.

Pigeons wheeled and circled, their breasts flashing against the blue as they turned; bees hummed in the flowers that tumbled over the stone edges of the terraced garden; all the sweets of spring scented the warm air.

Just beneath where they sat was a cream house with vivid green shutters and a little balcony with a rust-red awning. A girl in a white bodice stepped out upon the balcony, and leaning over its rail began to sing. A note or two floated up through the golden afternoon air, throbbing, passionate. After a little, she stopped and laughed: then plucking a sprig of scarlet geranium, she kissed it carelessly and flung it downwards to some unseen person. Then she disappeared behind the green shutters.

Titian drew a long breath. It was like watch-

ing a scene at a play, but incomparably better. This was life. No stage scene which she had ever beheld approximated to reality as she conceived it. The men and women had always seemed artificial, the situations improbable, if not impossible.

Miss Gerard's voice broke sharply upon her musings.

"If I did not know you, I should totally disapprove of you!"

Titian laughed. "Why? Because I don't want to cultivate the virtues? After all, what's morality? Like the sabbath, it was made for man, not man for it."

"Titian!"

"Since I came to Italy I have felt that I was coming into my kingdom. I know that I was a pagan in a former existence. Haven't you ever felt that you had lived before? Don't you remember the time when 'I was a king in Babylon, and you were a Christian slave?'"

"Certainly not," returned Miss Gerard firmly.

"Not even a Christian slave," Titian coaxed. "I wouldn't have dared to imagine you anything else, Miss Em, after the Colosseum."

"If you can imagine yourself a Babylonish king, you are capable of imagining anything," said

Miss Gerard. "But you were always a great one for talking nonsense."

The light suddenly died out of Titian's face, and she dropped her hands listlessly into her lap.

"But that was years ago," she said slowly. "Illimitable years ago. I haven't talked nonsense to anyone since, except to Bibi and Rufus. That was when I was young—far back in the Middle Ages."

"I don't mind your talking nonsense," returned Miss Gerard. "Go on if you like. It amuses you and does me no harm."

But the rill had been stopped for the moment, and Titian sat with folded hands looking at the scene before her. In the gardens on the hills opposite, almond-trees flushed rosily beside the cypresses, which always seemed to her to be so poignantly a part of Italy that the sight of them stabbed her with a pleasure that was closely akin to pain.

It seemed as if in the sun of these wander-months her arrested youth stirred and turned towards the light, pushing forth little tentative shoots of growth.

Over and above the storied wonders of the cities they visited, it was life that held for her the greatest fascination:—the life which flowed past her in the

streets, parks, shops, and boulevards; the life which environed her without actually touching her; the life on whose outskirts she stood, gazing wistfully.

The reaction from the warping influence of her married life showed itself in a continuance of withdrawal from contact. A faint reluctance, born of diffidence and self-distrust, enwrapped her as a cloud and prevented her from joining in the great procession as it went by. Sometimes her heart stirred to the sound of light steps tripping to a lilting measure. Sometimes the tread of strong feet marching awoke an answering echo within her. What tune would the Pipe of Life play for her? she wondered. Oh, it must be a gay one, a happy one, a magic one, her starved youth cried.

Her pulses quickened as she listened. Soon, soon she would hear the tune that would set her own feet dancing on the high-road. It was as if far below in the depths of her nature she heard the first faint bubblings of some hidden well-spring of joy and delight.

She did not miss any inner comradeship. She had never possessed it. Hers had been a lonely mind, thrust back perforce upon itself. As far as outward companionship went, she and Miss Gerard got on excellently. Each was content to be

lenient with the idiosyncrasies of the other. Miss Gerard dismissed Titian's dreamy enthusiasm with an indulgent wave, and Titian ceased to look for comprehension once she had explored Miss Em's limitations.

While Titian, in mere spectator-sense, saw life, Miss Gerard diligently strove to make the most of the unexpected opportunity which had fallen to her lot.

Her predilection was a curious one. Scenes of past violence, lit by the red torch of murder, held for her an unconquerable fascination. With an avidity singular in a woman who had hitherto led such a placidly blameless life, she followed the blood-trail through the centuries with all the zest of a sleuth-hound.

In Paris, each detail of the blood-stained Eve of Saint Bartholomew and the even gorier period of the Revolution claimed her keenest interest. To the riotous tales of the Commune she lent a slightly less willing ear, while modern Paris she dismissed as being frivolous and immoral.

"How do you know it's immoral?" Titian had asked bluntly.

"I feel it in my bones," Miss Gerard returned. "Don't you?"

"I'm glad to say I don't," Titian answered.

"I don't think my bones can be as morally sensitive as yours, Miss Em!"

"Ah, that's because you're married," retorted Miss Gerard.

Titian reddened, and let the subject of Parisian immorality drop.

In Rome, the Colosseum had been Miss Gerard's favourite haunt, and the entry from which the wild beasts were wont to emerge upon their hapless victims drew her as if with a spell.

In Florence, her imagination was captured by the gloomy palaces and narrow paved streets whose gutters had run red where Guelph had met Ghibelline in the feud of generations. Splendidly insular, she traced the "streams of foreign gore," with less horror than the shedding of one drop of English blood would have given her.

Titian often teased her gently on the subject.

"It's history, my dear," she always replied, as if that answer at once supplied argument and excuse.

Now, as their wandering thoughts circled like the pigeons over a city wrapped in a golden haze, the sound of bells came towards them on the mellow air.

Titian roused herself.

"If Rome is the City of Fountains," she said

dreamily, "surely Florence is the City of Bells. I never heard so many or such varied tones."

"Where would you hear them, after all?" asked Miss Gerard. "Perched, as you were, like a sea-gull on a rock at Camus! Have you heard lately from Mr. Mede?"

"Not since we came to Florence," Titian answered. "I expect that he is very busy. I'm sure he will have some wonderful studies to show us when he gets back. Dear old Fenty! It's such an interesting hobby, isn't it?"

"Photographing birds? Well, I don't know. It seems to me that a man might do something better with his time."

"Shoot them, instead of snap-shoot them," retorted Titian quickly. "I suppose one might expect that from you with your bloodthirsty tendencies."

Miss Gerard rose. "Come, I think it is time we were getting back, if you mean to walk."

"I certainly do, said Titian. I can't bear that squeaking tram. Let us go down by the cypress walk. I love the story of the Merciful Knight."

"Roman Catholic legends!" sniffed Miss Gerard with her most aggressively Protestant air. "I wonder that you can bring yourself to believe in such rubbish."

"Nothing so beautiful or helpful can be called rubbish. And as for believing, isn't it better to believe and be wrong than not to believe and be wrong?"

This saying gave Miss Gerard so much food for thought that she was silent until they reached the paved stretch of the Lung 'Arno, when she startled Titian, whose thoughts had wandered far afield, by exclaiming:

"Not if it means believing in all those Popish legends!"

"Oh, Miss Em!" Titian began; but, having long since learned the value of silence, she closed her lips upon further speech.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WATER-LILY CITY

MANY people would have been glad to make friends with Titian had she permitted it. Her beauty always caused a slight stir wherever she appeared—a stir of which she herself was quite unconscious.

The richness of her colouring was enhanced by the clinging black gown with which Marshall had provided her; while the look of appeal which her brown eyes cast on a still unfamiliar world was emphasised by the shadow of her mourning. It was mourning seen through a prism, edged with all the rainbow hues of romance.

Time had accustomed her to Arnot's scrutiny and appraisal. She accepted the fact of her beauty with a calmer spirit than that with which she greeted a blue morning or a rose-flushed sunset. It was there, but it, unlike these joy-inspiring happenings, was one of the things that did not matter. She had heard enough about it in the years which now clanked their chains behind her.

It was only men who cared if a woman were beautiful or not. She had had enough of men, she thought in all the arrogance of her ignorance, quite unwitting of the fact that if she were ever to drink of the Wine of Life for which her starved being unconsciously craved it must be a man who would hold the cup to her lips.

This attitude of aloofness was carefully fostered by Miss Gerard and Marshall, who looked with the eye of suspicion upon any traveller however harmless. They saw behind the most innocent attention a wile of the predatory male, while Titian went on her way serenely unconscious of their efforts on her behalf.

Thus were the difficulties of chaperonage to a young, rich, lovely, and inexperienced widow modified.

From Marshall, Miss Gerard learned some details of the Camus menage which rather puzzled her.

Poor Mr. Fleury, she was told, had simply *doted* on Mrs. Fleury. He could hardly bear to let her out of his sight. He had loaded her with dresses and jewels.

If this were indeed the case, Miss Gerard mused, it was odd that Titian did not show more affection when speaking of him. She mentioned his name

as casually, even more coldly than that of an utter stranger. Why had she not loved him more? She had never shown any real grief at his loss, and hers was a warm nature. Miss Gerard lacked the imagination necessary for filling up the chinks of the known with the merely conjectural.

Her own affairs she resolutely thrust into the background. Sometimes a curiosity as to how the misguided Baldwin's married life was progressing obtruded itself through her other preoccupations, but she pushed it back again and slammed the door upon it.

She had only heard from him once since she had started on her travels. It was while they sojourned in Rome. The letter was bestrewn with Latin quotations which she could not understand and which irritated her as much as if they had been the successful Greek epigrams. Bits of local news were interspersed between the quotations and the letter concluded with a rather pathetic allusion to her good fortune in being in her present surroundings. "I had hoped to go to Rome for our honeymoon," it ran, "but Gwendoline preferred London. I could not let her feel that she has sacrificed her youth to me, but the traffic was most disconcerting and more than a little dangerous. We are very happy. Dear Gwendoline is perhaps

not quite so meticulous in household matters as you were, my dear Emily, but doubtless she will soon learn. *Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas!*"

"Will she indeed?" sniffed Miss Gerard, ignoring the self-gratulatory Latin phrase. "We'll see. Not so meticulous! A nice word to use. I suppose that means that the house is filthy, aye, and the dinners raw! But what could one expect from a person named Gwendoline?"

The reflection was not untinged with satisfaction; but as Miss Gerard wandered later through the Forum, seeking in its tumbled fragments "the grandeur that was Rome," a beautiful single column which loomed in front of her became inexplicably multiplied into two at the thought of Baldwin's underwear and table napery as her worst forebodings conceived them.

So the scroll of their days lengthened until at last it unfolded itself at the Water-Lily of Cities, Venice, whose palace steps are lapped by the green ripples of the Adriatic, whose very name is redolent of romance.

"Once did she hold the gorgeous East in fee."

And still she bears traces of the barbaric splendour of such capture.

Marshall, who proved to be as capable a courier as she was a *coiffeuse*, engaged a suite of rooms in the Hotel Bianca, rooms whose balconies were veritable "magic casements" to Titian.

Her bedroom owned two, one which overlooked the shadowed mystery of a side-canal, while the other jutted upon the sunny sweep of the Canale Grande. From it she could see the grey dome of Santa Maria della Salute, and the delicate, wind-blown figure poised on the summit of the Dogana, black against a pearl-tinted sky.

Here was life with a difference: the gay, gracious water life upon which the ancient palaces, rich in the dim magnificence of faintly-coloured marbles and exquisite traceries, looked down with all the stately indifference of the ages.

Titian felt as if she could not tire of watching it. It fascinated her to the point of silent ecstasy. She loved the dark winding water-ways which threaded their green paths between brooding mask-like houses, past mysterious weed-grown steps and rusty iron gate-ways, past clamped wooden doors which looked as if they had been closed upon the secrets of centuries; beneath pierced marble bridges and little spanning arches trailing creepers towards the sluggish water; past walls of hidden gardens over which the roses

tumbled riotously, swinging censers before the coming summer.

Just at first she was content to explore the wonders of Venice in her gondola; and she resisted all the inducements of her gondolier, Beppe, a handsome, black-eyed fellow, with a sprig of scarlet geranium stuck behind his ear, to visit the manufactories of lace or glass.

"Presently, presently, Beppe," she said in Italian, with a smile, and Beppe, struck to silent admiration of her beauty, ceased his persuasions until the next day.

"I am afraid that the water has washed away the blood-trail, Miss Em," she said, as the gondola floated over the dancing ripples of the Grand Canal on the day after their arrival.

The sunshine smote flashes from the heavy steel prow and the little burnished brass horses which held the crimson ropes along the gunwale.

Other gondolas sped past them, gay with silken sunshades and pretty women; gondolas with merchandise, gondolas ferrying work-people across the track of the fussy steamers. Everywhere was light, colour, movement.

Long quivering reflections from painted gold-topped *palle* threw vivid splashes of colour across the water, blue, orange, scarlet; colour which was

repeated above in the gay striped awnings on balconies. The air was warm and scented; the lapping of the water sweet as music.

Titian drew a long breath of delight.

"I know that I have lived here before," she said, looking triumphantly at Miss Gerard.

"I've no doubt that we'll find you on the walls of some of these palaces," returned Miss Gerard, with an unusual flash of insight. "Isn't it here that all the Titians are to be found after which your father named you? It was on account of your—er —auburn hair, I believe, wasn't it?"

"Call it red, Miss Em, if you like. I shan't mind in the least, I am too happy and too excited. I feel somehow as if I had suddenly joined the pageant. I don't feel outside it any longer. Isn't that funny?"

Miss Gerard looked at her critically.

Certainly her beauty seemed to have blossomed. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a deeper tinge of colour in her cheeks than they had owned yesterday. Even Miss Gerard's unimaginative soul was struck by her curious response to her environment. Leaning against the dark leather cushions of the gondola, Titian seemed to be in her rightful place. Had she worn trailing draperies of silk and velvet instead of her sombre black gown, she

might have been transported straight from some gold-framed chronicle of more sumptuous Venetian days.

Sub-consciously Miss Gerard was aware of this; but it was her practical mind that made practical answer, cutting across the tissue of the other's dreams.

"You're beginning to wake up. Your trip is doing you good."

"Am I beginning to wake?" said Titian, slowly; then as if half to herself: "I wonder when I shall begin to live?"

Low as the murmur was, Miss Gerard caught it. Her hearing was lynx-like in its sharpness, and the captured words smote her uncomfortably.

From "if" to "when" is a scarcely less decisive step than that from wonder to desire; while between desire and fulfilment may lie a barrier no wider than a threshold or more impassible than an abyss.

It was a dangerous train of thought, and a disturbing one withal.

Miss Gerard plunged into lurid tales of the Council of Ten and the Council of Three, and drew once more, in imagination, the black cloth of oblivion and ignominy across the portrait of the traitor Doge.

Suddenly Beppe turned the gondola into a side canal with a murmur of, "A shorter way, *excellenza.*"

A sharply defined shadow cut the *rio* in twain. Along the sunny side ran a paved pathway bordered by a railing, which suddenly opened into a little square, with a well sculptured with lions in the centre. Round the square stood cream-coloured, red-roofed houses with the friendly air of clustered gossips. A woman or two stood in the open doorways, children ran about, screaming over their play like the swifts in the blue above; a girl stood near the well, letting down a copper bucket with a cheery clank.

As the gondola glided along, Beppe gave a low whistle.

Out of the nearest house darted a pretty young woman in a black shawl with long knotted fringe. A child, whose rings of dark hair curled tight as a hyacinth's, was in her arms; a toddler, with big brown eyes, clutched at her skirt and peered from behind it.

She smiled and kissed her hand to Beppe. The toddler cried "*Babbo!*" and hid its abashed head, while the little one in the mother's arms opened and shut its tiny palm in true Italian greeting.

Titian turned, with a quick smile, to the gon-

dolier. The little scene touched a chord which made her eyes grow dewy as she looked.

"Your wife?" she queried.

Beppe, all flashing teeth and eyes, apologised for his daring, in Italian so fluent that she could scarcely follow it, in spite of her months of study.

Yes, it was his wife, he admitted, and those were his children; yes, he was twice father. The little girl, she was full of mischief. The son, already he swung his arm like a gondolier. It was a liberty no doubt to bring the *signore* past his own Campo, but he trusted that they would graciously pardon him. It was only that he could not resist showing his Marietta the beautiful lady whose gondolier he had the honour to be.

Titian, still smiling, told him of the pleasure it had given her to see his family. It was no doubt foolish of her, she said gaily, but she had never thought of gondoliers as being married. She had always pictured them as standing under balconies and serenading the beloved one.

Beppe threw back his handsome head, and laughed.

"But that comes first, *signora*," he said. "No more balconies and serenades when one has a wife to work for. First one must provide the bread and

wine, and then, when the little ones come, it is they who supply the singing, *non e vero?*"

"A serenade that is not always welcome, perhaps?" she suggested, smiling.

"*Macche*, no! *Signora*. It sounds out of tune when one is sleepy. The *signora* speaks as one who knows. She has perhaps a little one of her own? No? *Che peccato!* But there is still time. To love, to marry, to work, to die. That is life."

"Do you leave no time for play?" she asked, flushing from the sudden thrust of his question and consolation.

"That is understood," returned Beppe, with a gleam of white teeth. "A *cameriera* of her Excellency's hotel gave me this flower to-day." He touched the scarlet geranium behind his ear. "I wear it. It pleases her. To-night I give it to Marietta. That pleases her. And all goes on its own feet!"

He laughed again, and Titian laughed in sympathy.

Here was life, quick and vivid.

"What is he saying?" asked Miss Gerard.

"He was telling me," she began, then stopped, feeling that Miss Em might not quite approve of the conversation. "Oh, just little bits of human nature," she ended rather lamely.

"Human nature?" echoed Miss Gerard, suspiciously. "I am not at all sure that human nature is quite proper."

"I am sure that it often isn't," said Titian, smiling. "But it's life! That's what it is, Miss Em! Do you feel that in your bones? I do."

## CHAPTER III

### THREADS OF FATE

TO add a zest to Titian's days Fate spun a thread and sent her an adventure.

At first sight it appeared to be a mere episode, to be tossed aside and forgotten as lightly as a flower, but when the episode recurred, it ceased to be fragmentary and negligible, and assumed new and distinctly disturbing proportions.

It was Miss Gerard who precipitated matters and brought to Titian's notice what might have altogether escaped her observation had she been less watchful and suspicious.

"I do believe that man is following us," she exclaimed one afternoon.

"What man?" asked Titian lazily.

"There! In that gondola with the old gondolier."

Titian looked across the intervening space of water and met a man's eyes.

After a glance she looked carelessly away.

"I think you must be mistaken," she said, and

wondered that Miss Em did not hear the quick beating of her heart.

For in that one swift glance a look had flashed from thickly-lashed grey eyes to her brown ones which had thrust her back into the vanished days of her youth, and set her pulses throbbing as they had not done since then.

It was not merely that fires of admiration or desire had burned in them; to that Arnot had painfully accustomed her. It was something more or something less. Something which seemed to set the Pan-pipes playing. Some swift half-comprehended call of youth to life.

Her starved youth cried to her. She turned to look at the trees in the Public Gardens—a green blur; at the black poles that marked the channel to the Lido—dark blots upon an opaline sea.

When she dared to look again towards the other gondola it had vanished.

The trees once more merged into feathery outline. The posts were silhouetted sharp and clear, but her face was pale when she repeated her assurance to Miss Em.

"I think your studies of the olden days have coloured your imagination," she said, with forced lightness. "You will not be happy until you have us assassinated by hired bravos, Miss Em!"

"I never suggested anything of the sort. I merely remarked that a man appeared to be following us. I saw him yesterday too."

"Miss Em, you must have given him distinct encouragement!" Titian laughed, poised on a sudden wave of exhilaration.

"Do you think I imagine it was me he followed?"

"Who else?" asked Titian calmly, but with an air that forbade further comment. "The wicked has ceased from troubling now, Miss Em, so the weary, as exemplified by you, may be at rest."

"I hate that flippancy," retorted Miss Gerard, who appeared to be distinctly ruffled.

"I'm afraid that you are a little inconsistent," pursued Titian, leaning over the gondola and trailing her hand in the water. "At one moment you beseech me to talk nonsense, at another you rebuke me for being flippant. Is it a suppressed yearning for the unattainable, Miss Em? The desire of the moth for the star? For what I am not, when I am?"

"Oh, do stop," cried Miss Gerard, half-laughing, half-crossly.

Titian shook the sparkling drops from her fingers and leaning across laid her dry hand on Miss Gerard's arm. Her eyes appealed for understanding.

"Don't be cranky with me, Miss Em. You said the other day that I was waking up. Let me! Let me be frivolous and irresponsible if I like. Don't nip my poor little attempts in the bud. If you only knew—— But it's because you were part of my youth—— To you I'm still a child—— It's only to you I can even appear to be young and—and silly. Do let me!"

Miss Gerard was touched, she cleared her throat in her rasping fashion and patted the slim white fingers that lay upon her arm.

"Yes, yes, poor child," she murmured incoherently. "Heaven forbid that I should check you in any way. You've had a hard enough time. Sometimes I'm afraid I'm apt to forget your recent affliction."

"Oh, it isn't that," began Titian abruptly, her brow clouding.

Miss Gerard glanced at her. Here was the incomprehensible again.

"As for the young man," she continued, with an outburst of generosity, "I may have been mistaken. He may have been only taking an airing like ourselves. At any rate he looked a gentleman."

"An Englishman?"

"That goes without saying," said Miss Gerard, resenting the implication of the question.

For all that she might read of European aristocracy, from Russian nobles to the favoured "born" of Germany, from princely Roman to proud Spaniard, no list, pedigree, title-deed, or family-tree could ever convince her that the "grand old name of gentleman" could possibly be borne by any other than an Englishman!

"Shall we have tea at Florian's?" asked Titian. "You can have your photograph taken, feeding the pigeons if you like, Miss Em, or else go to the Sala della Bussola and throw a denunciation of the poor young man into the Lion's Mouth! I'm sure you must have been one of the Three in a former incarnation!"

"We'll let him alone for to-day," returned Miss Gerard restored to good humour at his disappearance.

She enjoyed having tea at Florian's. She liked the gay bustle of the Piazza. It gave her a keen sense of pleasure to see the tourists (as she always called them, ignoring the fact that she herself belonged to the goodly company) "making fools of themselves." She delighted in seeing the British Papa immortalised by being photographed with a pigeon perched on his tweed-

clad arm and another poised on his green Homburg hat.

So preoccupied was she with the humours of a family group who desired to be photographed "all together"—first "with pigeons" then "in gondola," that she failed to notice the presence of a young man at a table a little way from theirs. Not a young man either, but the young man—slight, well-groomed, of medium height, with strikingly handsome face, and heavily-lashed grey eyes.

Titian became aware of him as she withdrew her gaze from the bubble-like domes and jewelled façade of San Marco.

He was caressing a small moustache and apparently studying the Bronze Men on the Clock Tower when her eyes first lit upon him, but she caught a gleam from beneath the fringed lids which made her turn away her head, with an absurd feeling of confusion.

She moved her position slightly and detached her gaze from any part of the scene which might even remotely include him.

It was ridiculous, she thought, that the glance of a passing stranger should have the power to disturb her, no matter how faintly. It was due to the secluded life she had led, and was still leading.

She must mix more with men and women. She must try to make friends with some of the people who were evidently only anxious to be kind. Then she would know how to meet the glances of strangers with equanimity, how to ignore them, as she had done hitherto. She had not noticed before whether people had looked at her or not. It was all Miss Em's fault for detaching him from the throng. Sharp as a lance-thrust came the memory of Arnot's face in the church at Breston, separated from the others by that luminous ray.

She sighed; then raised her head proudly, pressing her foolish preoccupation into the background of her thoughts.

A tall Venetian girl with high-piled fair hair was coming across the Piazza. The sun struck glints from her gold pins and the round earrings which swung as she walked. Her long-fringed black shawl stood sharply out against the scarlet flagstaffs as she passed by each in turn. Her heels clicked upon the pavement. She bore a great basket of carnations poised lightly against one hip—crimson, rose-red, and pale yellow.

As she drew near the table at which Titian and Miss Gerard sat, she thrust her hand into the basket and drew out a bunch of the spice-scented blossoms with a smile.

"Will her excellency buy my flowers?" she asked, holding them towards Titian. "See these rosy ones, they have the colour of love."

"They are very beautiful," said Titian, taking them and burying her face in their sweet petals. "And these crimson ones, what colour have they?"

The girl flashed a glance at her. It held all the Southern homage to beauty. "These have the colour of life," she answered.

"And the yellow ones?"

"*Ecco!* The sulphur ones have the colour of jealousy. The *signora* need have nought to do with them!" she cried, with gleaming teeth and a toss of her head that set her earrings twinkling.

Titian drew out her little gold purse.

"I will buy some of each," she said.

The girl separated the colours with deft fingers. The warm sun drew out their odour, heady as wine.

"Here, for the most beautiful *signora*, love and life, at such a little price, *excellenza!* For the old *signora* the flowers of jealousy. They will not harm her. She must have closed the door of her heart against them long ago."

She handed a knot of the sulphur-coloured ones to Miss Gerard with a most misleading smile, unwitting, like all superficial observers, of the

tinge of that lady's sentiments towards the errant Gwendoline.

"Love and life at a little price," mused Titian when the click of the girl's heels had merged into the other sounds of the Piazza. She smelt the carnations eagerly. "Does one ever pay a little price for anything that matters, I wonder? Love and life. I want to know what life tastes like at any rate. Does it matter what one pays? I have paid heavily enough for the only love I have known."

She gazed with eyes that saw nothing, across the busy sun-filled Piazza.

From his table the young man feasted his eyes undisturbed upon the lovely line of cheek and neck, upon the waves of ruddy hair beneath the curving hat brim, upon the graceful contour of the whole figure, upon the slim beautiful hands that held the glowing flowers; and thought that never in his life had he beheld so exquisite a creature or one who seemed to be so unaware of her own beauty.

She had forgotten his very existence now,—that was evident to the most casual observer; but he would have given much to know if her carefully careless movement as she sat down at the table indicated any knowledge of his presence. He had

haunted her, persistently, but unobtrusively, since her beauty first swam upon him out of a moonless sky, worshipping it with the fervency of a Greek and the impersonality of an artist, and wondering vaguely what man would play Pygmalion to her Galatea.

For the moment, he had no desire for closer acquaintanceship.

"She may be a beautiful fool," he said to himself, as if one of Arnot Fleury's oft-repeated phrases vibrating through the ether, had set some responsive wave in motion in his brain. "She ought to hire some exquisite old Palazzo and sit there for hours letting herself be admired. Such beauty as hers should be public. It should belong to the nation. However, if it did, some enterprising American would probably snap it up. As it is, there is still a chance for England."

Titian pushed back her chair and rose. So did Miss Gerard, shaking the crumbs from her lap.

The young man noticed the different way in which the two women held their flowers. In Titian's hand they seemed to be a part of the picture, emphasising the note of life in her glowing hair and rose-leaf skin. Miss Gerard grasped hers firmly but self-consciously, with no pleasure in

their beauty, but a determination to do her duty towards the giver by carrying her gift.

They moved; they melted into the crowd.

With a deep breath that was almost a sigh, the man rose too, and went upon his way.

## CHAPTER IV

### "SKIRTS OF STRAW"

AS if Titian had truly evoked the Spirit of Life from the flower-girl's basket, the sense of awakening stayed with her, quickening her.

She felt as if she had stepped across a threshold into Venice, a threshold which led her into a wonder-world; a world where one lived, where one had encounters, where things happened. The happy zest of her lost youth seemed to dance like Will o' the Wisp in front of her, luring her steps—whither?

She did not stop to question or to analyse. She only wanted to feel for once what it meant to be young and free; to feel what girls feel before life fetters them. For it does fetter them, she thought, no matter whether their chains are of gold or iron. Hers had been gilded, but oh, how grievously they had encumbered her! They were gone now. They clanked no longer, but still her feet went heavily because of them.

She was a girl still in spite of her thirty years and her matronly title. She would capture Will o' the Wisp. She would learn to do as other girls did, to enjoy what other girls enjoyed. She would learn to live, before all the leaves of life had fallen from the tree; to taste its wine before all the drops had oozed out of the cup.

With lighter step, she entered the courtyard of the Hotel Bianca, still illumined by that dawn-light of awakening.

After the brilliance of the outer world, the hall seemed semi-dusk. Some people were coming out, and Titian, turning aside to avoid them, collided with a lady who stood in the shade of a great palm.

In the confusion, Titian dropped her book and purse. An elderly man who followed in the lady's wake picked them up and handed them to her.

The book was a copy of the *Rubaiyat* which Titian had had bound in Florence. Her name—Titian Fleury—was blazoned delicately across its vellum cover.

The lady's eyes, blue and bright, lit upon it as Titian took the book with murmured thanks.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but are you, by any chance, Mrs. Arnot Fleury?"

Titian looked quickly at her. Her voice was pleasant and there was a familiar timbre in its

tones. There was something oddly familiar also in the rather square face with its blue eyes and frame of faded fair hair, yet Titian knew that she had never met her before.

"Yes, that is my name," she said, wondering how anyone should know her.

"What a delightful coincidence!" the semi-familiar tones continued. "We have just been calling on you, and were so disappointed to find that you were out. May I introduce my husband, Sir Hugh Tempest. I am Mary Tempest, poor Arnot's cousin." She held out her hand.

Titian took it in a sort of dream. This must be the cousin Mollie with whom Arnot had quarrelled long ago.

"Are you Fenton's sister?" she asked. At the thought of Fenton, her only real friend, a little waft of loneliness floated across her new-found joy, like a wisp of mist across a sunny meadow. It was the shadow of past loneliness cast by the promise of future companionship, but it lent an appeal to her gaze which went straight to Lady Tempest's warm heart.

"Of course, I'm Fenty's sister," she answered, pressing the hand she held. "He has often spoken of you. It is not my fault that we have not met before."

"No," answered Titian simply. "You fell out with Arnot, didn't you? He told me that you disapproved of him."

Lady Tempest smiled a little uncomfortably.

"That is all past and forgotten. Poor Arnot was his own worst enemy. But I hope it will not prevent you from being friends with us."

"I don't see why it should. People must judge for themselves," answered Titian, attracted by Lady Tempest's likeness to her brother. "Fenty's sister ought to be worth making friends with."

"You're a sensible young woman, Mrs. Fleury," said Sir Hugh Tempest, in a deep voice that startled her.

He was a delicate-looking man of about fifty, with mild eyes and a drooping moustache, and the incongruity between the fragility of his physique and the resonance of his voice was striking.

"Oh, please say that to my friend Miss Gerard," cried Titian, with her swift child-like smile. "Miss Em—why, she's gone! I should like her to know that one person in the world considers me sensible."

"Doesn't she?" asked Sir Hugh, with an answering smile.

"Quite the reverse, I assure you. But why are we standing here?" cried Titian, all her hospitable

instincts afire. "Won't you come up to my room and let me give you tea?"

"No, thank you. We've already had some. Besides we must be getting back. My husband is forbidden to be out late. We've come to Venice in search of health for him." Lady Tempest turned a look upon the drooping figure beside her which made her plain face beautiful. Love, such as Titian had never seen, irradiated every feature. She drew back a little, abashed as at the unconscious revelation of some treasured secret.

"Oh, I hope you will find it," she cried, impulsively. Then she half regretted her words, fearing lest they should think her—what was it Arnot used to call her—"a gushing simpleton?" Yes, that was it. He had at least implanted in her a nipping dread of her own impulses.

Lady Tempest noted the warmth of her response and the sudden shrinking.

"Poor child, what a life she must have led!" she thought. "We must do what we can for her." Aloud she said with a little smile: "I think I may say that we are on its track, mayn't I, Hugh? We have an *appartimento* in a delightful old palazzo here, the Palazzo Marin. Will you come and have tea with us to-morrow, you and your friend?"

"I shall be delighted, thank you, and I am sure she will too."

"Come early. Come about four o'clock," said Lady Tempest. "I want you to meet my daughter. She has a wholesome regard for her Uncle Fenty. I think he is the only being in the world of whom she stands in awe."

"Fenty?" Titian echoed. "I cannot imagine anyone standing in awe of Fenty. He is so gentle, so kind."

"Have you ever seen Master Fenton in a temper?" boomed Sir Hugh.

"Never."

"I did, once," Sir Hugh continued. "It was with a lad who had been ill-treating a dog. I never forgot it. Neither did the lad," he added, after an effective pause.

"Oh!" said Titian, "I think I can understand Fenty's getting into that sort of temper, but I don't think I should like to see it."

"It was a sight for the gods," answered Sir Hugh. "A grand Berserk rage. Something for which to be thankful in these bloodless days."

"My dear Hugh, if you begin being Norse there is no knowing where you will end," said his wife, slipping her hand through his arm. "Come home and read sagas to your heart's content, and let

Mrs. Fleury ponder over this new revelation of the mild and gentle Fenty."

A very true affection rang in her tones as she spoke of her brother, and Titian's heart warmed to her because of it. She had had so little fondness in her own life that she longed to sun herself even in its reflection now. Whatever Arnot's quarrel with Lady Tempest had been, she was not going to take it up. She could not afford to thrust aside the friendship that was so graciously proffered. What would it be like to meet people who were so friendly disposed towards her as these people evidently were? She had no friends save Fenton and Miss Em, and while she knew that one belonged to another generation she felt as if the other did. She had not yet re-adjusted her ideas on the subject of Fenton's age.

Acting on another of her budding impulses she asked Lady Tempest not to call her Mrs. Fleury.

"It will make me feel as if I really knew you," she said flushing, "if you will call me Titian."

"It is good of you to let me. It is the name by which I know you best. You must remember that we are cousins by marriage. Arnot and I were like brother and sister once." She sighed a little as she turned away; a sigh for one of life's lost opportunities.

She had not striven very hard to get to know Arnot's young wife. She had let hurt pride stand between her and a reconciliation which might have meant much to this beautiful young creature who looked at her with such appealing eyes. She had taken Arnot at his word and let him alone, and now the ghost of what she might have done rose reproachfully before her. The path of middle life is haunted by such ghosts for those whose inner vision Time has not dulled.

Titian crossed the courtyard with them, and stood on the steps while their gondolier untied his boat from the blue and white *palle.*

The sun was setting, and Venice was bathed in rosy light. Bats flitted over the flushed water.

"Don't forget to-morrow," called Lady Tempest. "Palazzo Marin. Anyone will tell you."

"I am not likely to forget. My gondolier, Beppe, is sure to know."

Titian raised her carnations to her face as she turned away and went to seek Miss Gerard to tell her this surprising news. The scent, the light, the wonderful day, the new zest, seemed merged into one magic whole.

She smiled to herself as she went up the marble stairs, and many a head was turned to gaze admiringly at her.

Miss Gerard received the news of the encounter with unassumed delight.

"I'm thankful we've come across some people whom you can know," she said. "I went straight on instead of waiting for you, when that crowd of tourists was going out. I thought you were behind me. What sort of looking people are the Tempests?"

"Lady Tempest is like a small, neat, feminine Fenty. Her eyes are brighter and more alert than his." She thought of the look she had seen in them, and wondered if Fenton's could ever glow like that. Then she reflected that she had never seen Fenton's eyes properly. They were always half-veiled by his dusty-fair lashes.

"Well?" said Miss Gerard, impatiently. "That's not much of a description."

"There's nothing very distinctive about her, I think. She has Fenty's nice smile and pleasant voice. I like her. She seems kind."

"And Sir Hugh? What is he like?"

"If you can imagine a reed-pipe with the note of an organ, you have him in a word."

"I'm afraid I haven't got your lively imagination, Titian. Even if I could mentally summon the picture you suggest which is the word?"

"Oh, don't be so literal, Miss Em. Reed-pipe

and organ, of course. He is thin and slight and faded as a rush, and he has one of the deepest voices I have ever heard. It booms at you in a most startling fashion."

"Any family?"

"Lady Tempest mentioned a daughter. She must be quite young. Oh, Miss Em, isn't it exciting to think of meeting young people? She will seem like a child to me. I wonder if I shall know how to talk to her. I have forgotten what it is like to be young, and yet, deep down there's something stirring—stirring." She stopped abruptly and turned away. "I must put these delicious things in water. Love and life—at a little price." She looked back impulsively from the door. "Oh, Miss Em, to-night I feel as if I could believe anything—anything pleasant, I mean. As if one should say, not that things were too good to be true, but that they were good enough to be true!"

She hummed a little song to herself as she shut the door and Miss Gerard saw "as in a glass darkly," a reflection of how joyless her days must have been when this trifling incident seemed enough to flood them with light. She felt a qualm for a temperament so impulsive, so responsive, so unguarded by knowledge or wisdom and she

wondered, not for the first time, how Titian would fare in her encounters with an unfamiliar world.

Titian herself had no such qualms. She dispatched Marshall for vases for the carnations and sang softly as she stepped out on the balcony to look at Santa Maria's looming majesty against the sunset. The little figure on the Dogana with its flying hair and outspread cloak stood black against a rose-scarlet sky. The ripples in the water beneath were red as the carnations. Bats circled about her, one coming so near that it brought a waft of cool air to her flushed cheek.

"Is this life?" she asked herself. "This wonderful glowing feeling? Am I really beginning to taste it at last?"

She pressed her hands to her cheeks. Certainly she had never felt like this at Camus. For a thrilling moment she wondered if she were to be thus set alight by a passing spark what would happen if she met a flame?

Flames in the sky, on the water, in her cheeks, in her heart!

What a fool she was! How could she be so easily excited about nothing? Why should the world look suddenly rosy because she had met two elderly people who seemed inclined to be friendly? It was not anything personal, either. Their kind-

ness was shown vicariously for Fenton's sake, and not for her own.

"Perhaps Arnot was wise to curb my impulses," she thought, with a sudden quelling sigh. "They seem to run riot when I am left to myself. As for future flames—as Miss Em says, it's only she who wears skirts of straw need fear a fire! I wonder if I wear skirts of straw? I wonder if it hurts much to be set on fire? Some fires purify, while some only scorch."

She thought of Arnot's gloating gaze and of the light she had seen in Lady Tempest's eyes an hour ago—an inner light which had transfigured her whole face like a flame seen through alabaster.

Then Marshall entered with green twisted vases and the commonplace closed in upon her once more.

When she was ready to go down to dinner she took a knot of the rose-red carnations and thrust them into the folds of her belt.

Marshall saw the action with disapproval. She opened her mouth as if to speak, closed it again, and finally could not refrain.

"Madam, I don't think those flowers are quite the thing. With mourning one doesn't—if they were white, or heliotrope—but that vivid pink—!"

Titian arranged them to her liking before she

answered. Then she said in a tone that Marshall had never heard her use before:

"Please understand that I shall wear what I like, when I like, Marshall. I am not in mourning in any sense of the word. I have never really pretended, but I am not even going to pretend to pretend any more! I am going to enjoy life as much as I possibly can."

With that she swept from the room, leaving the astonished Marshall gaping like the fish to which Arnot had not inaptly compared her.

## CHAPTER V

### ROSE-RED CARNATIONS

AFTER dinner Miss Gerard retired to her room to write letters.

Titian, too full of her vague unrest to sit still, too much stirred to wonder at her new sensations to take interest in the written phases and fancies of others, wandered from window to window, from table to table, moving papers, taking up books and putting them down again without looking at them.

Presently the sound of music drew her to a balcony.

A *barca* hung with lanterns had paused beneath the hotel, and the thin tuning sound of mandolin and violin twitched across the stillness.

With the light step of a girl, she ran into her bedroom for a wrap, and found a velvet cloak edged with ermine lying ready on her bed.

"Marshall is really wonderful," she said to herself with a smile, remembering how her maid had

not wished to bring the garment at all, as she deemed it "unsuitable for mourning wear!" "She adapts herself to circumstance with the ease of a chameleon! Or is it meant as a silent rebuke, I wonder? Never mind, I'm going to put it on. I'm going to listen to music on the water. Music in Venice! How enchanting!"

The soft fur touched her cheek pleasantly and nestled against her neck as she drew on the cloak. It reminded her of Bibi, now a stately courtier with an Elizabethan ruff. Her arms felt suddenly empty. She pulled the folds closer about her as she went out on the balcony.

It was a clear night. As yet the moon was hidden, but the blue depth of the sky was fretted with the silver fire of stars. The gondolas' lights flitted about the canal like golden fire-flies, shedding flakes of orange-colour along the dark ripples. Here and there a steel prow flashed as it caught a ray.

The square awning of the singing-*barca* was outlined with paper lanterns, pink, yellow, saffron, red, softly-suffused globes of colour which flung a warm light upon the faces of the singers. As the *barca* swayed, the rich reflections quivered on the water with a fantastic suggestion of keeping time to the swinging notes of voice or violin.

The music was not particularly good, but for Titian it was touched with the glamour of the time and place.

There was all the enchantment of novelty to her in strains that would have re-echoed with boring familiarity to others. There was for her no cloying in the sweetness of "*O Sole mio,*" or "*Ciri biri bin.*" They were fresh and magical as "horns of Elfland faintly blowing."

At last a girl stood up to sing,—a girl with a pale face and lips as red as her coral necklace. She had a voice which throbbed like a nightingale's through the velvet dusk. She seemed to be caught in the net of some inner emotion as she sang. Titian could see the curve of her half-closed lids and the dark crescent of her lashes against the whiteness of her upturned face. It was a love-song in the soft Venetian dialect. "*Amor', amore,*" pulsed through it like a heart-beat. The notes were liquid and melting; the soft superlatives were murmured as if for the ear of the beloved alone.

A listening silence fell upon the crowd of gondolas clustered round the *barca*. Not a breath was heard until the last "*amore*" rang on the air like a silver trumpet call, and died away in an exquisite diminuendo.

There was a pause, a sigh, and then a burst of applause.

Titian, as she fumbled for her little gold purse, found that her eyes were wet. It was the last song. As the orchestra struck up a merry march the surrounding gondolas began to disperse. The shifting lights of the Chinese lanterns detached white patches of faces in them as they moved away.

On the side of the *barca* where the girl sat a hand began to untie a rope that was fastened to the gunwale. Its movements caught Titian's eyes and held them. It was a strong brown hand and it paused for a moment as if the knot were too closely tied for its undoing. Then it touched the black shawl which the singing-girl had slipped over her shoulders with a swift furtive caress before it returned to its legitimate task. Titian, fascinated, saw the knot grow looser. Then the hand slid round the girl's waist and pressed it passionately. The girl made no sign except to slip her own hand over it with a quick clasp. She half-closed her eyes again, and her red lips parted in a smile as the rope slipped off the gunwale and the *barca* floated away.

The gondola did not follow it. Titian, leaning over the balcony, saw that it held only one figure beside that of the amorous gondolier, of whose face

she caught a glimpse in the lantern's flash as he ran deftly back to his place at the stern. It was a face alight, working with some swift emotion.

The sight thrilled her. The episode awoke a sudden excitement. She looked again. The gondola had not moved. The gondolier kept its place with a dexterous motion of his oar. It lay like a dark shadow on the water beneath, scarcely distinguishable from the other shadows save for the golden firefly at its prow.

The figure in the stern moved slightly, turned its face upwards towards her. Through the dusk it seemed a white blur. From the distant *barca* came a thin tinkling of mandolin, a high wail of violin, the sound of a note or two of far-away song.

Suddenly out of the shadows beneath came a nearer note. The man in the gondola was singing —at first softly as if to himself, then with a careless abandon, as if he sang for his own pleasure and cared not if any heard. He sang in English. That in itself held the elements of surprise. Titian listened eagerly. She caught a phrase here and there—happy lilting phrases, beads of joy strung on a golden thread of song.

"I hear the bird-song closes
Ring out in the sunshine,
In all the wood-reposes,

There runs a magic wine
Of music all divine.
All things have scent and singing,
The happy earth is ringing
With praise of love and June.
Have I alone no tune?
Have I alone no tune?"

The voice, a light tenor of admirable quality, paused for an instant on its question, and then in an exquisite cadence gave the joyous answer:

"All dumb are birds and singer,
The song in kisses dies
And sound of happy sighs.
What need of songs and singing
When love for us is ringing
Bells of enchanted gold?
Bells of enchanted gold."

Titian held her breath as she listened. Here was song of a quality to which her ears were unaccustomed. Each note was round and perfect as a pearl, each word coloured with its own special significance. The voice was not very strong, but it had a peculiar searching sweetness that seemed to pluck at her very heart-strings and set them quivering in instant response.

She leaned farther over the balcony, but noiselessly, lest she should disturb the singer, who had ceased with his softly echoed "Bells of enchanted

gold." She wished with her whole soul that he would sing again. Never in her thirty years had she wished for anything with such a disproportionate longing.

What was it, after all? The voice of some chance-heard wanderer, who, like herself, was caught in the magic mesh of a Venetian night, a web spun of blue darkness and silver fire. Ah, but the voice wove the final spell, made the enchantment articulate.

She heard a murmur from the gondolier, and an answer in Italian spoken in crisp English tones.

"No, Giacomo, not yet. I wish to wait a little longer."

"The night is young, *signore*."

It was an Englishman then. She wondered—her cheeks grew suddenly hot. How foolish she was! There could be nothing in the coincidence, if it were a coincidence. How she wished that Miss Em had not put that stupid idea into her head! It was too schoolgirlish of her even to remember it.

"I wish to wait until the moon comes up from behind those clouds," the clear tones went on.

"*Va bene, signore.* She will not now be long."

Titian's cheeks cooled again. He was only waiting to see the moon. She had been dimly

aware of a growing brightness which was gradually causing the mystery of shifting lights and half-lights and velvet darknesses to merge into shadowy bulk of houses, long water-ripples, and black darting gondolas.

She hoped desperately that he would sing again. She sent her yearning towards the dark outline in the gondola with all the force that she could summon.

As if in response, the pale blur turned upwards once more, and the round even notes welled into the blue dusk.

This time the singer voiced the *Wish of Ædh* in a melody which seemed one with the night, the place, and the magical words, so closely were they all interwoven.

"Had I the Heavens' embroidered cloths
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet;
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

The beauty and wonder of the song and its setting held Titian spellbound.

It was a dream-happening, an unhoped-for

glimpse through a "magic casement." Her fingers loosed the soft fur which she had held closely about her throat: her cloak fell back revealing the lovely line of her neck and shoulders. Then, sudden as a silver flame, the moon sprang from behind a barrier of palaces, and flooded the Grand Canal with light, frosting the fretted marble of balconies, and cresting each ripple with crystal fire.

Its rays fell full upon the still figure on the balcony, on the proudly-poised head with its waves of ruddy hair, waking to green fire an emerald on one slim clasped hand.

The white blur in the gondola revealed itself as a face—the face of the young Englishman of the afternoon, gazing upwards with a tranced delight at the figure on the balcony above him, so beautiful in her mantle of black velvet and white fur, so exquisitely right in every detail of environment. For a moment or two he gazed his fill. Then Giacomo the gondolier made an unconsidered movement, which drew Titian's eyes upon him.

The magic casement closed with a little clang and the "perilous seas and faery lands forlorn" vanished from her gaze. She came back to earth again.

It was still night, still enchanting, still Ven-

ice, but the real had obtruded itself upon the ineffable.

Slowly her inward vision adapted itself to outward detail. Her gaze fell from the gondolier to the singer. Recognition was instant. She flushed, moved, drew herself up abruptly.

The sudden movement detached the carnations from her belt. They fell upon the parapet of the balcony. She put out a swift hand to grasp them, but the edge of her cloak swept them outwards, and they slipped, with a warm waft of perfume, into the gondola beneath.

For a moment she stood rigid, transfixed with hot shame and anger.

"He will think I did it on purpose," she thought. "He will never understand."

Then, with a chiding, "What does it matter after all? I shall never see him again, I hope," she turned abruptly into the darkness of her own room, pressing the backs of her cool hands to her burning cheeks.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE TEMPESTS

THE Palazzo Marin stood in a side canal which widened at the point where it flowed into the Lagoon under one of the marble bridges of the Riva degli Schiavoni. Farther in, it grew narrower and the tall houses almost met overhead, thinning the sky to a strip of blue.

The green water lapped sluggishly at the weed-grown steps which led up to a great gate, across whose time-worn surface the word "mystery" seemed to be blazoned in the hieroglyphic of its tarnished copper studs.

To-day it stood hospitably open, although it still bore its air of secrecy as Titian and Miss Gerard mounted the great echoing stairway to the *appartimento* of the Tempests.

In the huge bare *sala*, with its expanse of marble floor inadequately dotted with rugs and its vast walls hung with tattered and faded tapestry, Sir Hugh and Lady Tempest seemed almost microscopic.

"We have made an oasis here near the window," said Lady Tempest, advancing to meet them. "By turning our backs on the rest of the room, we can pretend that the desert does not exist."

"But it is beautiful," said Titian, with soft enthusiasm. "Why do you call it a desert? It is perfect, and the tapestry is fascinating. Look at the lovely dim old browns and greens and purples! And the marbles of the mosaic, and the beautiful old carved chairs!" She looked around her with an unfeigned delight at what her hostess considered moth-eaten rags and dust-traps.

The afternoon sunshine slanted through the window. Titian stood in its light and Lady Tempest could not fail to notice how the faded richness of the tapestry behind her set off the living richness of her beauty. With an unwonted artistic impulse, she drew forward one of the old carved chairs and placed it against the tapestry.

"You must sit here, then," she said. "But if you admire all these ragged old things so much, I don't know what you'd call our oasis."

"I should call it an anachronism," answered Titian, smiling as she stroked the lion's head on the arm of the chair with a caressing touch.

"I prefer modern comfort to suiting ourselves to our environment," put in Sir Hugh. "We are

anachronisms in ourselves. My wife and daughter and I have absolutely nothing in common with a mysterious, legend-haunted Venetian *palazzo*. We are impertinent in living here at all, so it is only part of our original impertinence to affront these bare deserted chambers with our modern accessories. Now you, Mrs. Fleury, if you will permit me to say so, are absolutely in the picture. You are the right person in the right place. You look as if you had lived in Venetian palaces all your life."

His voice woke resonant echoes in the big half-furnished room.

Titian smiled; she felt an odd sense of having passed through this scene before. The great *palazzo* seemed to echo with the footfalls of elusive memories.

"I am sure that I must have been a Venetian lady in some former incarnation," she said, still caressing the carving with little quick touches.

"Titian, when will you learn sense?" put in Miss Gerard. "I admire Lady Tempest's wisdom in making at least one corner of this big barrack habitable."

"Sir Hugh thinks me a very sensible young woman, don't you, Sir Hugh?" She appealed to him as a child would. "As for Miss Em, in her

Pagan days, which of course she has quite forgotten, she erected a little altar to a square-toed, square-shouldered godling, with straight hair and a blunt nose, whom she christened the God of Common Sense, and at whose shrine she has worshipped ever since!"

"I like modern comfort combined with ancient tradition," said Sir Hugh, "and if I am any reader of character I should say that Miss Gerard thoroughly agrees with me."

"You are quite right," replied Miss Gerard, obviously gratified.

"If Miss Gerard likes old traditions you had better show her the bloodstain in the dining-room, Hugh, before the sun goes down."

"Would you care to see it, Miss Gerard? It is a room in which any crime might have been committed. This particular one was what the French poetically call a 'crime passionel.' A jealous husband hid behind the tapestry to surprise his wife's lover. He succeeded. He gave him the extreme surprise of finding a dagger between his ribs! A beautiful bloodstain marks the scene. They repaint it for every new tenant, I believe."

"Hugh!" said his wife, half-laughing, with a glance at Titian to see how she took his juggling with the storied past.

But Titian was smiling too.

"That's better than letting it get rubbed out altogether," she said, unexpectedly.

When Sir Hugh and Miss Gerard had gone in search of the bloodstain, she turned to Lady Tempest.

"You did not tell me how you knew that I was here."

"Fenton told me that you hoped to be in Venice in May, and asked me to look out for you. I saw your name in the list of arrivals at the Hotel Bianca, and went at once to call on you."

"That was really kind."

"Not at all, my dear child. I would have done more than that for Arnot's wife, if I could," she added, with a little sigh.

"Would you mind telling me why you quarrelled with Arnot?" Titian asked, diffidently. "Don't, if you'd rather not, but I think we'd understand each other better if I knew why you fell out. You were once inseparable, Fenty told me."

"Ah, that was in the old days. Arnot was just as much of a brother to me as Fenty then—more in a sense, for he was nearer my own age and more companionable. When he grew to manhood and got the sole control of his fortune he—ran wild for

a time. Naturally, as I see now. You are sure that this won't hurt you?"

"Nothing that you could tell me of Arnot could hurt me now," answered Titian in a low voice, clasping her hands in her lap.

Lady Tempest looked at her curiously for a moment before she went on. Her swift changes of mood puzzled her. At one moment she seemed gay and impulsive as a child, at another grave with the gravity of a woman who has known the searing touch of sorrow: now frank and confiding, then withdrawn into a sudden shy reticence. She was as intriguing as an enigma to the less complex woman who strove to study her, and who failed of knowledge because she lacked the key-word.

"He ran wild, as I said. Sowed a fine crop of wild oats in London, Paris, Vienna. When he came home to reap them, I foolishly put in my sickle. I presumed on the unreal sistership, I suppose, and he—resented it. That was the beginning. Then I married." Her face softened and her eyes glowed for a moment, but there was no such magical illumination as Titian had seen yesterday. "You know what young married women are like." She laughed a little, but Titian was unresponsive. "They think that they have a mission to regenerate the world, particularly

the celibate portion of it. I had a friend, a very pretty girl. Arnot worshipped beauty, as you know."

This time a perceptible tremor ran over the still figure in the great carved chair, like a shiver of wind across a cornfield.

"He was greatly attracted," Lady Tempest continued. "She, too, was fascinated by him. He had a way when he chose which few women could resist. You are sure you don't mind?"

Titian shook her head. "Quite, quite sure."

"There certainly was an understanding between them, if not an actual engagement. Hugh had taken some shooting in Scotland. It was near the sea. The girl, I won't tell you her name, it's better not, was staying with me. Arnot, we heard, was cruising in his yacht."

Back, in a flash, came the moment of their meeting. The tapestry-hung room vanished. She saw the pier and the sunlit sea, and the advancing white figure. She caught her breath.

"You are sure that this does not upset you?" said Lady Tempest anxiously. "I would not hurt you for the world. I forgot how recent this is." She touched a black fold.

Titian looked full at her. Some unknown emotion burned in the depths of her eyes.

"This, as you call it, is a mockery. My heart wears no mourning for Arnot, and that is the only grief that counts. Please go on."

"Arnot's yacht put into the nearest harbour. The girl and I were full of delight and excitement. We went down to meet him. He had people with him. Not the right sort of people. There was a—a woman, a musical-comedy actress, an impossible person. He should not have brought her. It was an insult to us both. Quite unforgivable. She, the girl, broke off the affair at once. I saw him and told him what I thought of him. I suppose I was uncharitable. I know I was too outspoken. I was young and happily married, and since then I have learnt that such are wont to be appallingly virtuous and narrow-minded. Arnot let me say my say. Then he sneered at me, and told me that willingly he would never see me or speak to me again. He didn't. After the accident I wrote to him. I begged of him to let bygones be bygones, to allow me to come and see you even if he would not be friends with me himself, but he would not. He refused, first through Fenty, then, in answer to a final appeal, through his man."

"Hammond! How like him!" The past came swirling round Titian like a flood.

"I could not take messages through a servant. You understand, don't you? You forgive me? I should, perhaps, have been more persevering, but Arnot said things that were very hard to bear."

"He would," said Titian, in the same low voice. "It amounted to genius with him. He always knew exactly what would cut deepest."

"He wasn't cruel to you, child?" cried Lady Tempest, in swift incredulity. "Fenton never told me that."

"What did Fenton tell you about me?" asked Titian, ignoring her question.

"He spoke of your beauty——"

Titian moved abruptly.

"Your loyalty, your goodness to Arnot, your amazing patience with him. He was full of wonder at you."

The coldness ebbed from Titian's face. Life and warmth flowed back into it, softening it once more into its former graciousness.

"Fenton is a good friend," she said simply.

"Will you let me be another?" asked Lady Tempest. "Forget what I have told you. Raking up the past is rarely pleasant or advisable. The present is all we can count on. Let's make the best of it."

She held out her hand and Titian clasped it warmly. She was again her old impulsive self.

"It is wonderful," she said quickly. "Yesterday I had no friends in the world except Fenty and Miss Em. To-day—I feel as if I had known you for years. And Sir Hugh too."

"Ah, Hugh takes some knowing," said his wife softly. "He is a very fastidious person, let me tell you, and is by no means easy to please. He took to you at once. But that is not surprising," she added quickly. "To begin with—you won't mind my saying it—but you are so beautiful, my dear."

To her amazement, Titian's face clouded. A veil of disappointment was drawn across its brightness.

"If you only knew—" she began. Then she stopped abruptly, but a second later spoke again: "If you would only like me for something else. Won't you try? Beauty is so superficial. It doesn't really matter."

Lady Tempest glanced at her, puzzled.

"That's an odd saying for a woman, my dear."

"I have learned some things in a strange school," Titian half-whispered. Then she moved a little as if to shake off some mental oppression. "Won't

you tell me something about your daughter. Is she your only child?"

"No, I have two sons. Hugh is at Oxford, and Fenton—young Fenton we have to call him—is at Winchester."

"Hugh and Fenton," Titian repeated the names with pleasure.

"Yes, I called them after my two dear men," said Lady Tempest, softly.

"I have never known young people. I had no friends of my own age. The only young people I have ever spoken to were the villagers at home and at Camus. At Camus, somehow, I felt a little shy of them. I didn't quite know what to say to them. I think I liked the old people and the little ones best."

The naïvete of the statement touched Lady Tempest.

"Perhaps one is most in touch with realities at the opposite ends of life. In the marching years, when our vision should be clearest, we are rather liable to blur our outlook with the dust which we raise with our feet."

"Ah, the marching years? You have felt that, too?" Here was comprehension that was as the breath of life to Titian. She leaned forward eagerly, her lips parted, her eyes glowing.

"Of course."

"You haven't told me a word about your daughter yet."

"My daughter, Toye, is a very modern young person."

"Toye! What a quaint name."

"She was christened Mary Toye after her two grandmothers, and when we were wondering how to get over the difficulty of having a second Mary in the house she solved the problem by calling herself Toye. Toye she has remained ever since. It suits her somehow."

"Is she like you?"

"No. She is like neither of us. She has struck out a line of her own."

"It's best to be original if possible. One is not always too grateful to one's ancestors for inherited traits or features. If one is the first of a mould one hasn't such legitimate cause for grumbling."

"It all depends on the mould," returned Lady Tempest. Her tone was dry. Again Titian wondered why.

"I wonder if she'll like me," she said simply. "I have led such a secluded life that I shan't be able to talk of any of the things that interest her. She will seem very young to me."

"Toye is twenty-one. Of age and fully emanci-

pated. I am sure she will find plenty of subjects of conversation—if she's in the humour."

"In the humour?" queried Titian, looking up.

"My dear, you don't know the modern girl," said Lady Tempest with a dry little smile. "Toye herself will enlighten you. She is very fond of saying that the greatest affliction which Providence can bestow upon old-fashioned parents is an up-to-date child!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Titian, feeling oddly disappointed. "But you don't agree with her, of course?"

As she spoke, the door of the *sala* was thrown violently open and a tempestuous figure rushed in: A small slim girl in a white frock and smart bright green coat, wearing a hat with one black feather posed at an apparently impossible angle.

She rushed across the rug-strewn expanse, her little heels clicking on the marble spaces. Behind her came more discreetly a young man in a light grey suit. He wore a rose-red carnation in his buttonhole.

"Oh, mother," cried the girl. "I found Cosmo pigeon-worshipping in the Piazza and brought him back to tea. He's horribly boring. He's found a new divinity, and can talk of nothing else."

She tilted a glance back at the young man, who had paused perceptibly when he caught sight of the figure in the carved chair.

Over Titian's face stole a slow burning blush.

## CHAPTER VII

### TOYE AND THE TANGO

TITIAN hoped that her confusion passed unnoticed in the little flutter of introductions. The young man, Mr. Cosmo Trevor—"a neighbour of ours in Hampshire and a very old friend," —showed no sign of recognition when he was made known to her. Not even by the flicker of an eyelash did he denote that he had ever seen her before.

Of course not! She felt furious with herself for that deep betraying blush. It was all Miss Em's fault for her horrid prudish suspicions. The episode of last night had been a mere coincidence, and as for the carnation, the flower-girls' baskets were full of them. Rose-red carnations bore a strong family resemblance to one another. She must curb these silly flutterings and excitements, this magnifying of the trivial into the momentous.

She would have given much for the cool self-

possession of the girl before her, who swept into their conversation, re-arranging the group and taking the lead as by right divine.

Toye Tempest was surprisingly different from what she had expected.

Lady Tempest had spoken truly when she said that the girl resembled neither father nor mother. She had certainly struck out a type of her own, a type which to Titian seemed one of quaint, almost Byzantine ugliness.

Her hair, which she wore in a sweep across her forehead and coiled into a sort of cap at the back, was smooth and red—not the deep, beautiful auburn of Titian's own, but an uncompromising hue that verged perilously upon the sandy. Her face was small and piquant, her nose tilted, her mouth wide and variable, now mutinous, now laughing, now passionate, now almost sulky. Her skin was intensely white, but its pallor was veiled by a powdering of freckles. Her eyes were a greenish-hazel, very bright and vital. They were set rather at an angle beneath slanting dark-red brows.

It was a face full of possibilities for good or evil, a face elfish, a face provocative. Ugly it might be, nay, undoubtedly was, but it was arresting in its very ugliness, and was so full of life that it would

stand out where other and even lovely faces were passed over.

"I can only boast of *le beauté de diable*," she said once, with the amiable desire of shocking her mother—a favourite pastime of Toye's. "I mean in the literal sense, and not merely as applied to youth."

Now she gazed with frank curiosity at Titian, while she kept up a running fire of comment on things in general. Once she paused with a hot cake halfway to her mouth, gave a little chuckle, and cast a wicked sidelong glance at Cosmo Trevor.

"My dear Toye, are you choking?" he asked with pretended concern.

"No," she answered. "I've been suddenly smitten with an idea, and the event is so unusual that it made me laugh. You are generally interested in my ideas, Cosmo darling. Would you like to hear this one?"

Cosmo Trevor looked at her with swift apprehension. The pseudo-affection of the "darling" was nicely tinged with mockery. Titian too felt a vague uneasiness. She did not quite like the ring in the girl's tone.

"What?" she continued mockingly. "Ideas, even ideas as brilliant as mine go begging? What an age we live in!"

"It's precisely ideas as brilliant as yours which have proved to be the undoing of their originators," returned Cosmo calmly. "You have heard of people being blinded by a flash of lightning? I have no desire to be blinded by a flash of intelligence."

"Intelligence sounds like the British Museum and parsons' wives!" cried Toye. "Call me anything you like but intelligent, as you love me."

"But I don't," Cosmo retorted. "I don't love you one bit. You don't deserve it. Does she, Mrs. Fleury?"

Titian smiled with a little embarrassment. This quick interchange of familiar flippancy left her outside, somewhat bewildered. It was a side of life which had hitherto been untouched by her, and she felt instinctively that it would always remain strange.

To her surprise, it was Toye who rescued her from the difficulty of an answer.

"I won't let you appeal to Mrs. Fleury. It's not fair to force her to make personal remarks so soon. By the way, where's Dad?"

Lady Tempest started. "I completely forgot him. He took Miss Gerard, Mrs. Fleury's friend, into the dining-room to show her the blood-stain. They never came back. I must——"

"I'll go look for them," said Toye, rising. "Perhaps he has murdered her, or eloped with her. How exciting that would be of the dear man!"

She sauntered down the long room humming a tune as she went.

If Sir Hugh and Lady Tempest were anachronisms in the faded glories of the *sala*, what was she? Titian wondered. As utterly incongruous as a Futurist picture would be in the Doge's Palace, she thought, then chid herself for the comparison.

"You love Venice." The soft assertion broke upon her musings.

She turned to find Cosmo Trevor's eyes fixed on her.

Toye Tempest was fond of telling him that his eyelashes were wasted on a man. He had never found them so. They had proved distinctly useful in his varied and pleasant career. A younger son, blessed, or cursed, with a competence, he had drifted delightfully to his twenty-fifth year, unspurred by necessity to work. He was a privileged person among his friends; his thick lashes successfully veiled many a fluttering impertinence. He had charm as well as audacity, an admirable temper, and an excellent digestion. Some women complained that he had no heart. Some mothers fancied that he had too much, and labelled him

dangerous. His favourite pastime was playing with fire. So far even his beautiful eyelashes had remained unscorched. They made his glance at Titian inscrutable now.

"Of course," she murmured, fighting with her embarrassment. "But how do you know?"

"The right sort of person always loves Venice."

"Why should you think that I am the right sort of person?" She could not resist the question.

"You should not need to ask." His look swept her, the carved chair, and the tapestry into one comprehensive whole.

"Why?" she persisted.

Cosmo was disappointed. She did not know the rudiments of flirtation apparently, and it looked like sheer stupidity for one so lovely as she was to descend to such obvious fishing for compliments.

"Ah, Mrs. Fleury!" he gave a little sigh. Then he began to experiment. "You are surely one who is susceptible to all beautiful influences. Venice should make an instant appeal to you."

"It does," answered Titian frankly, now surer of her ground.

"What interests you most? The sad decaying splendour of the palaces or the dream-life of the lagoons?"

"Neither," she answered unexpectedly. "It is the homely everyday life of Venice which interests me most. The women drawing water at the wells, the clink of the copper buckets, the girls with their swinging earrings and long black shawls, the tap-tap of their little heels on the pavement. Oh, that's a delicious sound! So characteristically Venetian! Don't you love it?"

She turned to him, her face alight as it had not been since he and Toye entered.

"The flower-girls' heels?" he ventured, bending almost imperceptibly towards the carnation in his buttonhole.

Titian flushed. "Not especially. I delight in them all."

"I should have thought that the dim splendours of the past, the jewelled beauty of St. Mark's, the legends of mad loves and dead passions and vanished mysteries would have appealed to you more than anything else."

"They do appeal. They have their own place. But it is the vivid life of the people of to-day that most appeals to me."

"I confess that the doings of the proletariat do not interest me in the least," said Cosmo Trevor. "Frankly, I am greatly disappointed in you, Mrs. Fleury."

Titian's laugh rang out, gay and unrestrained as a child's.

"What a pity!" she cried, feeling suddenly at home with him. "I am afraid that you'll find many things to disappoint you in me if we see much of each other. Things that seem commonplace and everyday to you have all the charm of novelty for me."

"I am willing to take the risk."

"What risk?"

"The risk of disappointment."

"Oh, that?" She laughed again, but she flushed a little too.

"I would take any risk," he continued in lower tones, "if only you will permit me to see something of you, Mrs. Fleury. The request implies the very recklessness of my courage."

Titian's dimple sprang into being. "Perhaps the danger isn't as great as you imagine," she said, feeling a tinge of pleasure at her new-found powers of repartee.

At that moment, Toye returned.

"The worst has happened, I am glad to say," she announced. "Dad has not murdered Miss Gerard, but he has eloped with her! Saunders tells me that they have gone to see the Arsenal. They said they didn't want any tea."

Lady Tempest came back from the window at which she had been standing.

"I hope Hugh won't tire himself," she said anxiously.

"Mother, you coddle him a great deal too much. If you let him alone, he would be twice as well."

Her mother turned as if to speak; then checked herself. Her whole demeanour had altered since the coming of her daughter. A cloud of repression seemed to envelop her and make her suddenly colourless.

Titian could scarcely realise that she was the same woman who had talked to her with such sweet wisdom of her outlook on life only half an hour before. With a swift flash of intuition she saw something of Arnot's warped and warping disposition in this little slim ugly girl. She wondered what the warping influence had been. Surely on the surface her life seemed to spread before her fair as a meadow. Was the twist of mockery inherent, or had her character acquired it by the way?

Toye made a few sliding steps across the floor to them, her eyes fixed on Titian.

"This really is a ripping old room, isn't it?" she said.

Titian assented with an echo of her former

enthusiasm, surprised to find such a point of contact.

"For tango dancing," Toye added, laughing impishly at the irrepressible change in Titian's face. "Do you dance the tango, Mrs. Fleury?"

"No, I have never even seen it danced. I am very ignorant of modern life," Titian answered simply. "You will scarcely believe me when I tell you that I don't know what rag-time is."

"Oh, rag-time's a tune with a hiccup in it," Toye said. "But rag-time's dead, syncopated into its grave, praise be! The tango is a cat of another colour, as the Italians say. To think that you've never even seen it danced! Such a statement takes one back almost to the Garden of Eden, though I'm sure the Serpent would have tangoed beautifully! Aren't you, Cosmo?"

Cosmo's eyes were on Titian's changing face. Her beauty fascinated him, but her transparency was beginning to amuse him as well. There was all the piquancy of contrast between the gracious ripeness of her beauty and the suggestion of almost childlike immaturity which thrust itself at intervals through her manner.

She rose to go.

"I am sure that Miss Gerard will go straight back to the Hotel Bianca," she said. "I must

thank you for a most delightful afternoon, Lady Tempest."

"But you mustn't go yet, Mrs. Fleury," cried Toye, swaying towards her, her greenish eyes alight. "I could not answer it to my conscience to let you go without having taken the first step towards your education in modernity. Cosmo, roll up those rugs and we'll dance the tango for Mrs. Fleury."

"Perhaps Mrs. Fleury doesn't care to see the tango danced," put in Lady Tempest.

Toye laughed—a little tinkling glassy laugh that echoed up to the painted ceiling.

"That means that you don't," she cried. "Poor mummy!" She turned to Titian, who looked from one to the other in faint embarrassment. "Dad thinks the tango isn't quite nice, but mother considers it positively indelicate."

"To the pure all things are pure," murmured Cosmo Trevor in a voice meant for her ear alone, while his amused eyes were still fixed on Titian.

"Oh, purity's largely a matter of anæmia!" said Toye, shrugging her shoulders as she bent to roll up a rug.

"What is your Uncle Fenton's opinion?" asked Lady Tempest, stung into speech.

Toye's face clouded. "Bother my Uncle

Fenton! Fenty's an anachronism if you like. He's an early-Victorian old woman who has never been emancipated from the crinoline!"

"Does he scold you?" asked Titian, hoping in her heart that he did.

"Not much!" Toye laughed again. "It is not wot 'e sez but the nahsty way 'e doesn't say it. It would be quite unpardonable for any one to say the things that Fenty looks!"

"Good man, Fenty!" said Cosmo Trevor. "It's a blessing for us poor ordinary mortals that there is even one person in the world of whom you stand in awe."

"But I don't stand in awe of Fenty. Make no mistake about that, my good youth. I think it's rather the other way round. I resent Fenty's abominable capacity for silence. It's wicked to be so secretive and self-restrained. There should be give-and-take in the interchange of opinions."

"We all have more time for taking than giving, in your presence, Most Irrepressible!" said Cosmo, laughing softly. "Now, if Lady Tempest will be so good as to play *El Choclo*, we are ready to begin."

"And remember, Mrs. Fleury," said Toye over her shoulder, "that both as regards your education and the tango it is not the first step that counts, nor perhaps the forty-first!"

Lady Tempest moved reluctantly towards the cottage piano which formed part of the anachronism of the oasis.

"Toye will not stay anywhere without a piano," she said. "We had to hire one here. It came in a gondola! Can you imagine anything more incongruous?"

"Is your daughter fond of music?"

"It's one of her crazes. She has a voice like a bird. She has had good teaching. Toye, will you sing something for Mrs. Fleury before you start dancing? She would like to hear you."

"Please let my charms dawn gradually on Mrs. Fleury. Too much at a time is not healthy. I think the tango is all she will be able to digest to-day. Come, Cosmo." She held out white hands invitingly. There was swift allure in her posture.

"I should have known better," murmured Lady Tempest, with a little sigh. "She never will sing when I ask her."

Toye caught the sigh and guessed its import. She stamped her foot impatiently.

"Cosmo, are you coming?" she cried, frowning. Then the frown softened as he came up and slid an arm about her. She flashed a sidelong glance at him that to Titian seemed charged with unexpected

passion; but when she looked again it had sparkled into her former mockery.

There was nothing to shock or repel in the tango as Toye and Cosmo danced it in the tapestry-hung *sala* on that May afternoon.

Titian looked on as at a stage spectacle, admiring the litheness, the grace and dexterity of the dancers, who appeared to be animated by a single spirit. Each seemed to move in absolute concord as they abandoned themselves now to the languor, now to the fire of the dance. There was something sensuous in the appeal of the music and the woven paces that set Titian's heart throbbing as she gazed. Suddenly through it all stabbed a tiny prick of loneliness.

The dancers, in their isolation and the harmony of their movements, seemed as one, dancing within a fairy ring for their own delight, close-clasped, with eyes for none but each other.

Lady Tempest, spinning the music for their feet to weave, was outside one edge of the magic circle. She, the onlooker, was outside the other. What place had she here? How could she expect to come in touch with this young life?

As they stopped after a final daring pirouette, Cosmo Trevor looked at her across Toye's back-flung lissom body. Their eyes met. Again youth

seemed to flow back to her, to environ her, as once before.

She rose, feeling a sudden glow.

"It was wonderful, quite wonderful," she cried warmly. "How beautifully you dance! I wish I could dance like that!"

"We must teach you," said Cosmo. "Toye dances like a fairy, doesn't she? We'll give you lessons, won't we, Toye?"

"Rather," said Toye, but her tone lacked enthusiasm.

"You will find me a stupid pupil," Titian demurred. "I don't know how to dance at all."

"Not even the antiquated waltz?" cried Toye.

Titian shook her head. She felt tall and clumsy beside the girl's slender grace, and now Toye was making her feel every day of her years as well.

"We'll begin with the waltz, then," Cosmo put in. "You look as if you could dance divinely, Mrs. Fleury."

"Perhaps for a daughter of the gods like Mrs. Fleury the waltz would be more suitable," flashed Toye. "The tango is meant more for little devils like me. As a French friend of mine says, 'Le tango, c'est un danse intime!' Which being interpreted according to mother means that

it can only be danced with propriety with either your brother or your husband!"

"Toye, I will not have you quoting imaginary sentiments as mine. I don't think I have ever said more than a few words about the tango."

Toye's shrill-sweet laugh rang out, tinkling as Japanese wind-bells.

"You may not have said it, mummy, but you looked it. You have your dear brother Fenty's capacity for looking unutterable things. Do you ride or skate, Mrs. Fleury?"

"No," answered Titian, ruffled by the girl's catechism. "But I can fence. I'll take you on with the foils any time you like, Miss Tempest."

"I never learned fencing. I didn't think my figure needed it."

The shaft went home, and hung quivering for an instant. Arnot's frenzied reason for the acquisition of her accomplishment seemed to inspire the girl's words, and prick through them. For a moment, Titian felt as if she hated her, as if through her recurred the old hurts which she tried so earnestly to forget.

"Fenton used to be very keen on fencing," put in Lady Tempest.

"It was he who taught me," answered Titian, turning towards her with flushed cheeks. "I am

afraid it cannot rank among the modern accomplishments." She held out her hand. "You will come and have tea with me soon, won't you?"

Lady Tempest thanked her.

"Aren't you going to ask Cosmo and me?" put in Toye.

"With pleasure, if you care to come."

"Ask us at different times, then, please," Toye continued. "I hate going about in flocks, like sheep. Dad and mother always hunt in couples, unless Miss What's-her-name now has come between them. It might be unwise of you to throw them together too much, Mrs. Fleury."

Titian remembered Mary Tempest's look and smiled. Her smile was reflected on the face of the older woman.

"I think I may safely take the risk," she answered.

## CHAPTER VIII

### FIRES OF SUNSET

COSMO TREVOR took his leave with Titian, in spite of Toye's request that he should stay to try over some accompaniments for her. Titian felt a little glow of triumph, as if she had scored an unexpected point. In spite of Toye's disclaimer, she had caught sight of the flash of a foil.

Beppe, all attention, awaited her at the foot of the water-worn steps.

"Can I take you anywhere?" she asked, when Cosmo, bareheaded, had helped her into the gondola.

"If you will let me come with you as far as your hotel I shall find the rest of my way on foot."

"Oh, no, Beppe will take you wherever you want to go," she said, leaning back against the cushions with a sense of relief.

The setting sun had left the canal. Its green water moved sluggishly past the paved *campi*, swaying the weeds on the walls as it passed. The

shadows of the overhanging houses deepened the sense of mystery which enwraps the Venetian waterways like a veil.

Cosmo Trevor's voice was confidential as he bent towards Titian, who was half-sunk in reverie at his side.

"How has our specimen of modern girlhood impressed you, Mrs. Fleury?" he asked softly.

Titian moved slightly. "The type is new to me," she answered. "I daresay I shall get used to it. At present—" She stopped, every instinct rebelling against discussing the people from whom she had just accepted hospitality.

Cosmo read her thoughts. "You need not mind discussing them with me. I know them as well as—better perhaps than my own people. I confess that I am rather curious to know what effect Toye has had upon you."

"I don't like her manner towards her mother," answered Titian with some reluctance.

This ingratiating young man seemed to draw speech from her against her will.

"Ah, I thought that might jar. It isn't really as bad as it sounds. It is more habit than anything else."

"An unpleasant habit."

"Perhaps. Until you grow used to it. Lady

Tempest is a dear, but she and Sir Hugh are absolutely wrapped up in each other, and I fancy that Toye sometimes feels out in the cold."

"She did not strike me as being the sort of person who would mind that. She seemed to me to be as—well, as hard as she is brilliant."

"You mean flippant," corrected Cosmo gently. "I think she resented it in her early youth, and assumed that mantle of bright hardness to prevent any one from suspecting that she could possibly care."

"But does she?"

"Sometimes I have fancied that she does."

"Ah, that's it, then," Titian cried.

"That's what?"

"I thought there must be something underneath, something to account for her rather vicious desire to sting," Titian blurted out, impulsively.

Cosmo laughed. "She doesn't really mean to sting. It's mostly manner, acquired at first out of bravado, but now second nature. You must get used to modern manners, Mrs. Fleury. Toye and her mother are on ideal terms as compared with some mothers and daughters. Many mothers look upon their girls as hated rivals, and most daughters cordially detest their mothers."

"Ah, you are laughing at me!" cried Titian.

"You are taking an unfair advantage of my ignorance."

"I assure you I am not," he asserted. "It's quite true. Wait until you go into society. Society spelt with a large S."

"I don't want to go into it if it is composed of people like that," she cried warmly. "I'm too old-fashioned to enjoy it or appreciate it. You belong to it, don't you?"

"More or less," he answered, amused.

"Then isn't this the fashionable time of year in London, when people—Society people, I mean—congregate there and do things?"

He laughed softly. She really was delicious.

"You are quite right."

"Then why aren't you there, doing things?"

"Have you ever heard of a fiend called Influenza?"

"Yes."

"I don't know whether he or fiend Boredom is the worst. I suffered from both, rather badly, and when the Winstanleys asked me to come yachting with them in the Mediterranean I jumped at the chance, as energetically as the fiends permitted."

"Are you staying on a yacht, then?" How inextricably her life seemed to be mixed up with the sea and the ships that sail thereon! Was she

never to get away from the spider-threads of the past?

"No, not now. They shed me here. I am on my way home."

"You don't seem to be in a hurry," said Titian, with her laugh that was so frankly childlike, so utterly different in timbre and inspiration from Toye's sweet sophisticated tinkle.

"Who could be in a hurry to leave Venice?"

As he spoke, the gondola shot under the dark arch of a bridge into the dazzling brightness of the great lagoon.

"Don't go in yet," Cosmo urged, moved by a sudden impulse. "It's too lovely. One so seldom gets the time and the place and the—er—appropriate person all together."

He wondered if she knew the true version of the quotation which he had just mangled. She made no sign.

"Row out into the lagoon for a little, Beppe," she commanded, drawing off her long black gloves and trailing one hand in the water.

As she held it up the sun's rays caught the drops of water at each pink finger-tip, flashing them to diamonds, while the green fire of her emerald blazed for a moment.

Neither spoke as the gondola sped over the sun-

lit water with delicious motion. The whisper of the ripples at its bow was soothing as music. At last, with a swift gesture, Beppe turned again and stopped dramatically.

The sun was sinking, turning the lagoon into a sea of gold, barred by long rolling amethyst ripples: groups of *palle*, black against the gold, marked the waterway to the Lido, a low sapphire cloud on the horizon. Chioggian fishing-boats, like strange richly coloured butterflies, orange, yellow, scarlet, drifted slowly homewards.

To the right lay Venice, a fairy city, wrapped in an opal haze. The delicate atmosphere changed almost imperceptibly from palest blue to lavender, rose, topaz, turquoise; owning, withal, an ineffable glory which no jewel even remotely suggests.

The gondola floated on enchanted waters. Titian was lost to all but the beauty and wonder around her. Cosmo's thoughts were held by the magic of the scene with this rose of womanhood for centre and the fires of sunset for background. They were aloof from their kind, detached from the world, held silent as if by a spell.

Suddenly across the still lagoon came the sound of many bells, deep-toned, thin, mellow, clear, exquisite.

It was the Angelus. Beppe reverently doffed

his cap and crossed himself; then bent with swift grace to his oar.

The spell was broken with sound and motion. With a deep sigh Titian returned to reality again.

"Ah, you've come back!" said Cosmo softly.

"Where was I?" she asked, the dream still lingering in her eyes.

"How should I know to what 'faery lands forlorn' you had wandered?"

"I don't think I know myself. But it was very beautiful—very wonderful."

"And it's not like coming back to earth to come back to Venice."

"Ah, you feel that too." She turned to him with quick delight. There was something almost pathetic in the surprised pleasure with which she greeted any sign of mutual understanding.

"Venice itself is a dream," he said, still in the same soft caressing tones. "A dream from which I, for one, am always sorry to awaken."

"You needn't awake just yet, need you?"

"I should like this part of the dream to last for ever."

Titian turned away her head. It seemed one with the magic of the evening that she should be here with this man, whose eyes said even more

than his lips, drifting upon glamorous waters, lulled by the music of his lightly uttered words. It was the recapturing of youth, this delicious acceptance of the momentary joy; this sensation of easy companionship and—something more. It was the something more, that subtly tinging nuance, which coloured the rest, and shone upon the iris-tinted wings of her lost youth a-flutter before her.

"No dream can last for ever," she said with a little sigh. "At best we can only pretend that it does."

"That is where the beauty of a dream lies. In its fragility. If it were to last for ever it would lose its charm."

"Why did you wish this one to last, then?"

"There are some dreams that one wants to turn into realities," he answered, looking full at her.

She veiled her eyes quickly, and her ready blush answered his gaze. His words stirred her as his looks had done before. She did not realise that such ease of speech must have been won by long practice with other women. Some lovers' purses are tied with cobwebs, and the coins of the man who makes love easily are worn thin, and polished by constant interchange. Her ears were pleased

by their ready jingling: her eyes perhaps a little dazzled by their brightness.

Beppe deftly steered the gondola through the dark traffic of boats by the Doge's Palace, whose marble colonnade and peach-hued walls were touched with the rose of sunset. The winged Lion on its grey pillar loomed black against the sky, while its crystal eyes seemed to be afire. For the moment of their passing the Campanile glowed in its new ruddiness. The broad pavement was thronged. The sinking sun struck glints from copper pots on the yoke slung across a girl's shoulders.

As they drew near the Hotel Bianca, Cosmo bent towards Titian.

"You will not forget your promise."

"What promise?" she asked, a little startled.

"Your promise to let me see more of you."

"Did I promise that?"

"You were going to, I think, when Toye interrupted us."

"Was I?"

"I am sure you were. Weren't you?"

She shook off her embarrassment and smiled.

"Perhaps I was."

"Will you begin to-night? Will you let me take you out in the moonlight?"

"To hear the singing?" she ventured.

"To hear any singing you wish." He flashed a glance of understanding at her.

She grew frightened. Her heart began to beat again. Oh, what a fool she was to be so fluttered! Again she longed for the cool self-possession of Toye Tempest. She shook her head.

"Not to-night."

He did not press her. "Perhaps to-morrow, then. If you were inclined to be very gracious, perhaps you would come with me to-morrow morning to Salviati's and help me to choose some Venetian glass for a wedding present."

Her face brightened. Here was something she could do to help. She possessed in abundance the true woman's desire to give—a desire which had never as yet known real fulfilment.

"I should like that very much. Shall I meet you there, and when?"

"If you will permit me to call for you and be your escort—" he suggested.

"That will be delightful," she returned. "I have seen very little of Venice from the inside yet. Miss Em loves shopping."

"Miss Em?" His face fell.

"I forgot that you hadn't met her," said Titian, realising the different aspects of the situation with

a rush. "Miss Gerard, I should have said. She is a friend of mine who is travelling with me."

"A sheep-dog?"

She looked at him with raised uncomprehending brows.

"I beg your pardon. But need you bring her?" he continued, with clouded air.

"I think she would feel very hurt if she were left out," she answered simply.

For a moment, Cosmo wondered if she were really as innocent as she appeared to be, or possessed of a subtlety with which he had not credited her. He rather hoped the latter. Sophistication held for him a far greater appeal than simplicity. He preferred jewels to flowers, and was no admirer of the uncut diamond. In its roughness, the gem was lost for him.

"Bring her by all means," he said. "That is understood, then. I shall call for you both at half-past ten."

He held her hand for a moment longer than was necessary at parting.

"Time is relative," he murmured. "Don't you agree with me?"

"I'm not quite sure that I know what you mean."

"I mean that friendship, like other things, is

not to be measured by moments. I have only known you, Mrs. Fleury, for an hour or two, as one counts time, and yet I feel as if I knew you better than people with whom I have been intimate for years."

"Do you?" asked Titian, rather wistfully. "I wonder why?"

"There are some hours which count above any telling. The hour on the lagoon. . . . Be kind, and say that you felt it a little too." His grey eyes besought under their thick lashes.

Titian was only human. Her crushed youth stirred and troubled her to a sweet confusion.

"Indeed I did," she cried softly, scarcely knowing what she said. "It was—it was an unforgettable hour."

"Ah, thank you," he breathed.

Then he went away, having rounded off his moment exquisite.

## CHAPTER IX

### TOYE INTERRUPTS

COSMO TREVOR'S first glance at Miss Gerard read prejudice, if not actual enmity, in every spare line. This was a state of affairs not to be permitted. He never made an enemy of a woman if he could possibly help it. Even those for whom his light love had flown upwards as a spark, dying as suddenly as it had risen, rarely felt a real resentment towards him.

"There is no fire in grey ash," was his general consolation, and he seldom troubled himself to see if the ash hid any embers that might be rekindled into flame.

On this dancing May morning, when white clouds slipped joyously across a vivid blue sky, any attitude of disapproval was not to be contemplated.

"I must tame this dragon until she comes and eats sugar out of my hand," he thought.

He was almost as sensitive towards dislike as a

young girl. It made him curl up inside, he used to say, and he never spared his efforts until he had changed the atmosphere to that degree of warmth in which his sun-loving personality best expanded.

The subjugation of Miss Gerard was by no means one of his most difficult achievements. The most rigid spinster is only a man-hater until some man begins to pay court to her.

Cosmo Trevor deferred to Miss Gerard's opinion as well as to Titian's, as she stood tranced at the beauty of the glass, the gold-flecked beakers, the amber and opal and sea-green shapes of exquisite beauty which had been blown, like bubbles, by Venetian lips into the clasp of golden dragon or sea-horse.

"They're not any better than your own at Camus," said Miss Gerard, at last.

"Oh, no. Mine are beautiful, but these are beautiful too."

"Do you mean to say that you have Venetian glass like this at home?" Cosmo asked.

Titian smiled with a new joy of possession.

"Yes. And we use it every day too."

He looked at her with an added interest. "You do? How delightful! How perfect! How absolutely right!"

"And my table-cloths are strips of finest linen, edged and inset with Venetian lace."

"No wonder I called you an appropriate person," he said. "How exquisite of you to surround yourself with what suits you so exactly!"

"It was not my doing," said Titian, quick to disclaim praise that was not her due. "My husband bought and chose the things. They were there when I arrived." She stifled a sigh. "But I love them, all the same."

"Of course. Will you come with me now to a lace shop and show me the sort of lace you've got. Then I can picture you with all your beautiful accessories."

"I didn't think men cared about lace."

"I care about all things lovely." He sharpened the point of his remark with a glance.

She turned towards the door. Such inferences held embarrassment.

The vast arcaded Piazza was thronged with people. The gold tops of the scarlet flag-staffs and the ramping Bronze Horses on San Marco glittered in the sun, which shone full upon the jewel-like mosaic. Pigeons fluttered and alighted in clouds, scarcely moving from beneath the feet of the saunterers.

Trevor led the way to a window full of specimens of lace.

"Are your possessions anything like these?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Mine are much better," she said. "There, that oval cloth with the medallions—do you see it? I have two something like that, only I think that the work on mine is finer."

For a moment, he wondered if she were boasting, but her evident sincerity disarmed him, and the thought of the fitness of her surroundings gave him a moment of æsthetic pleasure.

Titian seemed to divine his thoughts.

"Perhaps you will see them one day," she began diffidently.

"Oh, do give a house-party and ask me," he responded.

"And me too," said a voice behind them.

They turned, startled, to see Toye Tempest, her greenish eyes alight with mischief. Her father and mother lingered a few paces away, looking into a shop window in which dangled beads of every colour imaginable.

"How nice to meet you!" Toye cried. "You looked so absorbed that I could not resist the temptation of startling you. I am bored to tears. Mother and Dad will stop to look in at every

window. Mother now can't tear herself away from those beads. There's nothing of the primitive about me. I have no desire to revert to the squaw and hang myself with beads. Have you, Mrs. Fleury?"

"No," answered Titian. She felt sorry that this interruption had struck across the path of their wanderings. She had been quite happy strolling from shop to shop, warmed by the pleasant sense of Cosmo Trevor's nearness and understanding.

As she turned with a feeling of relief to greet Sir Hugh and Lady Tempest, her quick ears caught Toye's *sotto voce:*

"I say, Cosmo, you have been making hay!"

She flushed hotly. The girl was intolerable.

Lady Tempest wondered what had occurred to stir her. Was it annoyance at their interruption? Had the incorrigible Cosmo already begun to make love to her? She could not imagine anyone as taking Cosmo seriously, ignoring the vast differences that may lie between one point of view and another.

"Have you heard that Fenty is coming to Venice, my dear?" was her first question. "But I suppose you have, as it is your affairs which are occupying him."

"Yes, I heard this morning. Isn't it delightful?" Her voice softened. "Venice certainly is my lucky place. Look at all the friends I have found here! And now Fenty. I hope he won't be too full of business to enjoy things."

"I am sure he won't," said Lady Tempest. "But I suppose you ought to learn about the management of your own property. You have a certain responsibility——"

"Dear Lady Tempest, I know. When I go home, when my wanderings are over, I am going to be very good and learn everything I can, and give Fenty as little trouble as possible. But this is my holiday. I am just learning how to enjoy life, how to be young, how to—forget." Her voice fell. "That's why I hope Fenty will enter into the spirit of the place, and play a little, as I want to do."

"Poor child, your youth seems to have been starved."

"It was beaten as well," cried Titian with sudden passion. "I wonder that you don't see the marks. But why do we think of these horrible things in this lovely place? I've put the past behind me. I'm really looking resolutely towards the future."

"I hope it will be a very sunny one."

"I suppose we need clouds to make us appreciate the sunshine," Titian said, with her open smile.

Lady Tempest gave her arm a quick little squeeze.

"I wish Toye had been more like you," she said, impulsively.

Toye and Cosmo walked behind at a discreet distance. Her hat-brim tilted over and completely obscured her right eye, and her raiment expressed the latest word in smart simplicity. The eye which was visible glittered like a jewel. For a moment, Cosmo shrank from its darting brightness.

"Yes, you have been making hay," she repeated slowly. "Really, Cosmo, I admire you beyond words."

"May I ask why?" His tone was slightly ruffled.

"For your absolute 'rightness' in putting salt on the golden tail of Opportunity."

He reddened. "How long were you behind us?"

Toye chuckled elfishly. "Only that instant. What! Did you really comment on her 'absolute rightness?' I can hear you! Poor darling! It thinks it's unfathomable and yet it is as trans-

parent as a sheet of glass! Oh, Cosmo, Cosmo! In the throes of its very latest grand passion and doesn't want to be laughed at! Never mind, my Cossie. You're absolutely right (quotation is the sincerest form of flattery). Absolutely right to go in for the lovely widow. She's rolling in unrestricted money and has a wonderful castle perched on a cliff near the sea. Her late unlamented was a cousin of mother's, and the delectable Fenty, who for our sins in coming to Venice, is her guardian angel, so you can believe what I tell you."

Cosmo curbed his annoyance with an effort.

"If she's a sort of relation of yours how is it that I've never met her before?"

"Mother quarrelled with her husband. Turned rusty at discovering some little liaison or other of his. Rather dog-in-the-mangery of her, when she didn't want him for herself, but you know how narrow-minded she is! I never discovered the details—too young to know these things!" She grimaced. "Well, to make a rigmarole telegraphic, the poor wretch was smashed up in a carriage accident on his wedding-day, and your Golden Opportunity was immured in the old castle until he died. *Et voilà!*" She shrugged her shoulders expressively.

"Toye, why do you try to vulgarise everything?"

"Because I'm such a perfect little lady," she laughed. "I'm a little lady to my finger-tips, aren't I, Cosmo?"

"Sometimes I think you are a perfect little devil," he said.

"If I were a cat I'd purr. That's the prettiest thing you've ever said to me!"

"Are you serious?"

"How could I be?" she countered, with another of her swift side-long glances. "Haven't I been handicapped from birth, or rather baptism? Toye Tempest—Storm in a Teacup. Who could be serious with a name like that?"

"Roseleaf Tragedy," he capped.

She gave an impish chuckle.

"Dear, dearest, darling Cosmo, how like you! Don't waste it on me, my Cossie, I beg of thee! Keep thy poesies for the G. O. She will appreciate them."

"I wonder that the Holy Water didn't frizzle on your forehead when they baptised you," said Cosmo, with sudden temper.

She pinched his arm.

"Are you ever cross with anyone but me?"

"No. I've an admirable temper."

"Do you ever say things like that to other people?"

"Emphatically no!"

"Not even to the G. O.?"

"I wish you would not call her that." He tapped his stick impatiently on the pavement.

"What shall I call her then? The Sleeping Beauty? The Lord knows she might well have been asleep for a hundred years, she's so unsophisticated!"

"That suits her better," he admitted. "Yes, she has a sort of half-awakened look."

"Are you going to make it your business to awaken her wholly? You're rather good at opening people's eyes, you know, Cossie."

"Once and for all I decline to allow you to call me by that odious derivative."

"Lord, he's hurling words of ten syllables at me! I'd better get out of the way for fear I should be hit."

"If we were not in such a public place I'd shake you. It's not the first time I've longed to."

"All in words of one syllable, praise be! I needn't put up my parasol! Nor will it be the last I imagine, my dear young friend," she continued calmly. "Shall I be serious now, and give you a word of advice?"

"The change would be so remarkable that I feel inclined to risk it."

She played with the green tassel of her parasol for a moment, then looked up. Gravity peeped for a fleeting instant from behind the mask of mockery.

"To play with Simplicity is risky. Simplicity doesn't know the rules of the game. She thinks that counters are real coins. Perhaps she even thinks that the game isn't a game. You and I know better than that."

"For whose sake are you giving the warning?"

"Not for Simplicity's, you bet," cried Toye. "Water ices, no matter how beautifully they may be coloured, are only water ices. I prefer something with more flavour."

"So do I," said Cosmo.

For a moment, they looked at each other. Toye realised, as she turned away her head, that in her own peculiar fashion she had discovered exactly what she wanted to know as regarded Cosmo's relations with Mrs. Fleury.

Her mental processes were more curious than logical, but she rarely failed to arrive at the desired point.

## CHAPTER X

### FENTON IN VENICE

IN the morning of Fenton's arrival, Titian rose with a feeling of pleasant expectance. It was good to think that she would see him so soon; good to feel that she could share her new pleasures with her old friend.

But could she? She paused on the thought to wonder how he would fit in with his surroundings. At Camus there had been no room for creeping questions. His coming had been welcomed, his varying sojourns at Belfield regarded as green oases in the desert of her days; but here in Venice? She drew her brows together as she looked at herself in the glass. Would Fenton be content to dream away his time in a gondola? Was he capable of making a magic hour still more magical?

She flushed hotly as she turned away from the mirror.

"Who taught you the trick of comparison, you ungrateful creature?" she chid herself. "Wasn't

it Fenty who gave you the only good hours of your life?"

Yes, she was ready to admit it. All her memories of Fenton were good as bread, or water, or air—the elemental necessities of life—good, but not glamorous. For the new Titian a difference lay between the two that entirely lacked proportion. Fenton was a dear, all that was true and dependable but—there was a certain shagginess about him. That was how she phrased it to herself. She had never seen him in any environment but Camus. Now she wondered how he would adapt himself to his surroundings. She remembered a comment of Miss Em's.

"Mr. Mede is himself always. There's nothing of the chameleon about him, thank God!"

She laughed softly. No, there was nothing of the chameleon about Fenton. Was there about——

Marshall, entering, told her that Fenton had come.

"He is an early visitor," she said, going back to the glass for a final glance.

She felt a sudden desire to look her best for the friend towards whom she seemed to have shown a moment's disloyalty. Then she paused for an instant at the door with an absurd accession of shyness. As she entered the sitting-room with

hands held out in greeting, she stopped half way in surprise.

"Fenton! Is it really you?" she cried.

He came towards her and took both hands in his, smiling down into her lovely astonished face.

"My very self," he answered. "Am I so changed?"

"Changed? I should think so. You're a new Fenty. I'll have to get to know you all over again."

She spoke truly. Here was a new Fenton indeed. A clean-shaven Fenton, whose strong beautiful mouth was a visible revelation of what he had been to her in her dark hours. A Fenton whose tailor was as admirable as Cosmo's own; a slighter, younger Fenton, who held his big frame with a new erectness, but who looked at her with the same whimsical blue eyes which seemed to be all that remained of the outward semblance of the Fenton whom she had known.

"I didn't want you to look on me as an uncle any longer."

His smile touched her.

"Oh, Fenty, I didn't. I don't."

"Don't you? Then that's all right. Am I less like Nebuchadnezzar now?"

"I never said that you were like Nebuchadnezzar!"

"Didn't you? You thought it, though." In his shy way, he was eager to hear the word of approval for which he would not ask.

"Of course not." She gave his arm a little squeeze. "The change is a trifle embarrassing, though. I must get used to it."

"Do you like it?" There was no use in beating about the bush any longer.

"Yes, very much. It makes you look years younger."

"Does it?" He felt absurdly pleased. "Nearer your own age?"

She nodded gaily.

"I thought I might have caught you up, but I haven't. You've run away from me again. You're looking——"

"What, Fenty?"

"Very well," he ended tamely.

"What a dull remark!"

"Very beautiful, then, you spoilt child," he said. "I'm glad to see those bits of white about you."

He indicated the collar and cuffs of Venetian lace which she wore. There was no searchlight of criticism in his eyes. He looked at her as a man who has been prisoned in a cellar may look at the newly risen sun.

"I braved Marshall's disapproval once for all.

I am emancipated, Fenty. It's such fun to be independent, to do what one likes, to wear what one likes." She gave a happy little laugh.

Fun! Fenton had not heard her say that anything was "such fun" since the day when they had crept on tiptoe to the blue-tit's nest. She had had but little fun in her life, poor child.

"That's right," he answered with a twinkle. "But you mustn't emancipate yourself too far. Remember that I'm partly responsible for you."

"I see business trembling on your lips with that awful word "responsible." I really couldn't bear it this morning. We'll strike a bargain. We'll go out in the gondola now, and you shall come back here to lunch with me. When we are fortified you may talk business if you like, but you must give me the morning first."

"I'd give you more than that."

"Very well. Just wait until I put on my hat."

She ran into her room. He marked the new lightness in her tread and his heart rejoiced. These wandering months were doing all that he had hoped for her, restoring her poise, renewing her youth, fulfilling her beauty.

He sighed involuntarily when he thought of the warm welcome of her smile.

In a moment, she returned, and swept him from the room on a wave of joyous excitement.

"Just imagine, I have my own gondola. Doesn't that sound delicious? But I told you in my letter, didn't I?"

"You haven't written to me since you came to Venice. You sent me a picture-postcard from Florence giving your address here, but that was all."

"How remiss of me! But I really haven't had time; you arrived nearly as soon as your letter. You are much nicer than your letters, Fenty."

"Am I? I'm glad you think so. I'm not much use with the pen."

A train of thought led her to point out the Brownings' *palazzo* as they passed beneath it.

"Have you read their letters, Fenty?"

"The love-letters, you mean?"

"Yes."

"No. Would you?"

"I—don't know. Why not?"

"I'm very old-fashioned, I suppose, but it seems to me to be nothing short of sacrilege to read another person's love-letters. If anything in the world is purely personal and private surely it is the love-letters of a man and woman to each other. I should feel ashamed of myself if I read them."

Titian looked at him quickly. It was only yesterday that Cosmo Trevor had expatiated on the beauty and fervour of the "Letters." He had asked if he might send them to her when he had had them fittingly bound. Here were two very different points of view,—as widely different as the men themselves.

"But, Fenty," she demurred, "those two were not merely man and woman. They were poets. They belonged to the nation."

"They were man and woman before they were poets. Their poems may have belonged to the nation, but surely their love-letters belonged to themselves. I'm sorry you don't understand my point of view."

"You told me once before that I didn't understand," she said slowly. "Do you remember? It was long ago. That day about the kitten."

"Yes. I remember."

"I understand you better this time," she went on. Then she added in a low voice. "You know, Fenty, I never had any love-letters of my own. Perhaps if I had I should really understand."

"Perhaps you would," Fenton rejoined, averting his eyes from the wistfulness of her face. Then he said in a deliberately matter-of-fact tone: "Do you remember those cottages on the brow of the

hill, near the Winthrops' house? Poor Agatha died there of consumption, you remember."

"Yes," she answered in her turn.

"I want to ask your consent to have them pulled down and rebuilt. They are thoroughly unsanitary and there is no proper sewerage."

"Fenton!" she cried, turning indignantly upon him. "I asked for this morning. I bring you to the loveliest spot in Venice and you actually dare to talk of sewerage!"

Humour deserted her for the moment. She thought of the golden evening hour on the lagoon, the magic spell, the comprehending silence of her companion, and memory sharply pointed a contrast.

Fenton laughed, unaware of any comparison. For the first time, he felt a sympathy with what he used to consider Arnot's unnatural delight in seeing Titian flushed in anger. She certainly looked lovely with her parted lips and sparkling eyes. Too lovely, he thought, for the peace of mind of ordinary men.

"I beg your pardon. I quite forgot. I won't err again."

"I can't depend upon you."

"Not if I promise."

"I won't ask you to promise."

"Won't you? You needn't. Do forgive me. Have I broken the spell?"

"There was no spell," she answered, closing her lips firmly.

"Wasn't there? I thought there was," he returned, with becoming humility.

She relented. The dimple near her mouth sprang from its lurking-place as she laughed, half-reluctantly.

"There's no use in being angry with you, Fenty."

"Not a bit."

"I must be friends with you."

"That, at least."

"Why are you so prosaic?"

"Am I?" he asked, still looking at her. "Who has been pointing out my defects, Titian?"

She gave a little start. "Oh, no one. No one."

"Surely not Mollie?"

"Fenty, don't be ridiculous."

"Has Toye held her magnifying glass over my many flaws?"

Titian smiled. "How did you succeed in inspiring her with awe? She says that no one would dare to say the things that you look."

"Poor little Toye. She's a queer restless unsatisfied child. We are really fonder of each other than we pretend to be."

"Do you think she is capable of being fond of anyone?"

Fenton turned quickly. "You don't like her?"

"I don't understand her," answered Titian slowly. "She is an uncomfortable sort of girl, I think. I always feel as if she were trying to score off me."

"Toye score off you?" he repeated, with a comforting disbelief. "Absurd! She has too much sense to attempt any such thing. You mustn't grow fanciful."

His bluntness gave her a warm sense of well-being. She smiled at him.

"You're rather a nice person after all," she said softly.

"I have my uses, I suppose, in spite of being so prosaic. How do you like Mollie?"

"Oh, she's a dear. She is the image of you, Fenty. That drew me to her at once."

"Did it? Did it really?" He bared his head to the sunshine, and, as the strong light fell upon his face, Titian noticed that it looked a little worn. His eyes were tired, and there were lines about the sensitive mouth that was so new to her.

"Did you come straight through last night? Had you any sleep?"

"Plenty. Why?"

"You look tired."

"I've been having a rather worrying time lately."

"Poor Fenty. Not over my affairs I hope."

"No, my own."

"Oh." The soft monosyllable held neither query nor comment.

Fenton looked at her. This was not the time or place for the crudities of the only confidences he could give her, yet he made a tentative venture.

"Some day, if you will let me, I should like to tell you," he began and then stopped.

"I shall always be glad to hear anything that you care to tell me."

He turned away abruptly. There was no more than a friendly interest in her tone. She would listen graciously; she would give her sympathy perhaps, but she did not really want to hear. She was deaf to the undertone of need which had rung through his broken-off sentence. The thought stung.

They had left Venice behind—a magic blur of domes, roofs, and *campanili*. The lagoon was still and hyaline, palest blue with amethyst shadows. On the horizon, a range of hills, capped with snow and faintly flushed, lifted a fairy outline towards an ethereal sky. Nearer lay the dim hyacinth streaks

of islands; nearer still the slow-moving black silhouettes of gondolas.

It was as if the world lay under the thrall of an opal-tinted dream, so hushed was the air, so delicate the colours.

"Yet you deny that there was a spell," said Fenton slowly. She looked curiously at him as he leaned forward, his elbow on his knee, chin on hand, gazing towards the mountains. His eyes were opened wider than she had ever seen them; they held a look which she could not read.

With one of her quick impulses, she turned to him.

"There was a spell, of course, Fenty. I'm sorry I was so cross."

He looked at her in mute appeal for a moment. Speech that he longed to utter was forbidden, and he was no maker of jewelled phrases. Then he held out his hand. She put hers into it with a little sigh. "It's '*pax* and chums,' isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered. "I should be poor indeed if I were to quarrel with you, Fenty."

"And I, if Camus doors were to be closed against me."

"That could never be."

"I hope not," he said gravely. "Camus has meant the only home I've known for years."

"Oh, poor Fenty, what a wretched substitute for the real thing!" she cried out in swift pity.

"No, it wasn't," he said, and again, very low, "oh, no, it wasn't."

She felt touched, troubled, and proud all at once.

"But I did nothing for you," she protested in a voice that trembled slightly. "It was you——"

"You did everything," he returned in the same curbed tone. "You kept a light burning."

## CHAPTER XI

### TOYE'S HINT

WHEN Fenton's business interview was over, he went back to the Palazzo Marin, a tangle of thoughts in his brain.

From various remarks, uttered unconsciously by Titian, deliberately by Miss Gerard, he gleaned a fair idea of the looming importance of Cosmo Trevor as a factor in their Venetian life. He heard casual mention of tea at the Café Florian, trips to Murano and the Lido, and various shopping expeditions taken in his company, but he made no comment.

As was his wont since boyhood's days, he went in search of his sister Mollie to disburden himself of his misgivings.

He found her knitting in a deck chair on one of the balconies which jutted from the *sala*.

"Where's the family?" he asked, leaning against the parapet and feeling in his pocket for his pipe.

"Hugh is resting. I'm afraid he walked too far

this morning," Lady Tempest said, a little anxiously. "Toye is off somewhere with Cosmo Trevor. She is a restless little being and can never content herself indoors."

"How did you and Hugh come to have such a daughter?" said Fenton, filling his pipe.

"If one believed in the changeling theory, Toye might be quoted as a living proof! But don't let's talk of Toye. I want to hear about you. You never tell anything in your letters, and I want to hear all about you, dear old boy."

He smiled down at her before he answered. "What do you want me to tell you?"

"Well, first of all how you found your ward. She is a sort of ward, isn't she?"

"Titian?" He lit his pipe. "Oh, yes. A responsibility at any rate." He smoked in silence for a little, enjoying the soothing influences of the moment. "She's looking very well. She's—sort of blossomed, somehow. What do you think of her, Mollie?"

"I think she's lovely," returned Lady Tempest, warmly. "She has a most interesting personality, so naïve in some ways, so mature in others. She is like a child in her enjoyment of things. Yet sometimes in the midst of her enthusiasms a little veil of sadness suddenly comes over her, as if she

were stopped, pulled back by something, which she had tried to forget and couldn't. I can't explain properly, but you understand, Fenty, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Why is it, I wonder?"

"Arnot kept a very tight hold of her. He deliberately checked her development. He cared only for her looks."

Lady Tempest's thoughts flew backwards to Titian's little plea to be liked for herself.

"Ah, that accounts for it."

"For what?"

"For something she said to me one day when I commented on her beauty."

"What was it?"

"She begged me not to like her for that. She said it mattered so little. Could I not find anything else to like in her? It was rather pathetic, I thought, in one on whom Nature had showered so much. She is as lovable as she is lovely. Don't you agree with me, Fenty?"

Fenton did not answer. Lady Tempest repeated the question.

"Yes," he said, curtly.

He did not look at her. His profile was towards her as he leant over the balcony gazing at the freighted gondolas which passed beneath.

Something in his tone roused her, dry as the monosyllable had been. Dropping her work in her lap she bent across it.

"Fenty, do you care for her?" she asked, with a sudden flash of intuition.

"Yes," he answered again, in the same curbed voice.

"Oh, my dear!" Her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't mind. It doesn't matter. It can't be helped."

"Oh, my dear!" she cried again softly. "Does she know?"

"Of course not. How could she?"

"Women have intuitions."

"She's not a real woman—yet."

Silence fell again. Then Lady Tempest spoke.

"When did it begin, Fenty?"

Fenton pulled at his pipe and looked hard at the red-brown roofs opposite.

"Oh, you women, with your greed for detail! What does it matter?"

"Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"I've always told you things, Mollie. There's no reason why I shouldn't now, if you want to know." He drew a long breath. "I cared for her the first moment I saw her in the Nursing Home in London. Poor little lonely, bewildered

soul! I didn't realise that she was—the one woman until—she cried on my shoulder the day Arnot died. Then I knew."

"Fenty, my dear, the world is a hard place to live in." She wiped her eyes unobtrusively.

"It's the only place we've got at present, so we must make the best of it." He shook the ashes out of his pipe and refilled it. In spite of his philosophy, his hand trembled slightly. "There's no good in being tragic, Moll."

"But it is tragic," she persisted. "It's cruel to think that your whole life has been spoiled on account of the wicked advantage that was taken of a boyish infatuation."

"It hasn't been spoiled," he returned gravely. "It's only we ourselves who can spoil our lives. I've had as good a life as most men. As any man could have, lacking the best."

"You take things philosophically."

"Don't make it harder for me, Mollie. Don't make me sorry I told you."

"You didn't tell me. I found out."

"Well, don't make me sorry that you found out, then."

"I won't." She looked up at the stooping figure. She longed to put her arms round him, but she knew how Fenton hated demonstration.

For a long time, he smoked in silence. She took up her knitting again, and dropped stitch after stitch.

At last she spoke.

"Fenton, have you seen Adela lately?"

"Yes," he answered, looking at her for the first time. "I wanted to tell you. I have seen her twice. She is dying."

"Dying!" A light gradually dawned through the surprise in Lady Tempest's face.

"Dr. Brookwood says that she may linger for months, but perhaps only for weeks," Fenton went on with unusual haste. "She asked to see me, so I went."

He stopped. His face paled a little. He laid his pipe down on the parapet.

"Well?" she asked breathlessly.

"It was just as usual. The moment she saw me she flew into a frenzy and rushed at me. It was the same next time, only—— Well, she had a knife the second time. An old rusty blade. They didn't know where she had found it."

Lady Tempest shuddered. "Did she hurt you?"

"No."

"What an escape! Oh, Fenty, it must have been awful!"

"It was rather."

"And the law gives no redress?"

"None."

She pondered for a moment, ripping the wool where the stitches had been dropped. Then she cleared her throat and began tentatively:

"But, Fenty, if——"

He turned sharply on her. "Hush, Mollie. There are things which mustn't be said."

"I want to say them."

"That's no reason why you should."

"It's a very good reason."

"Have you no sense of honour?"

"A very keen one, but——"

"Stop!"

"I must say one thing," she persisted desperately. "If you are silent too long, it may be too late when you speak."

"I know. I saw that to-day."

She looked incredulous. "To-day? Oh, you mean Cosmo Trevor."

"Yes."

"I don't think you need have any fear of Cosmo. He's a philanderer."

"He won't philander always."

"Besides she's much older than he is."

"Only five years. And she's at least ten years younger than her real age in many ways."

This was a new point of view for Lady Tempest. She considered it before she spoke again.

"Of course, she is very lovely and very rich," she said at last, musingly.

"I never thought of that as a possible factor," returned Fenton, simply.

"I'm sure you didn't, but other men would."

"Cosmo Trevor is not the man for her."

"You are, Fenty," she asserted with hopeful conviction.

"Don't," he said, turning abruptly.

As he moved, his elbow touched his pipe and knocked it outwards. It slid over the parapet; he watched it fall with a dull splash into the canal.

"Another old friend gone," he said, straightening himself. "I loved that old pipe."

"Oh, what do such things as pipes matter?" she cried.

Fenton thrust his hands in his pockets and wheeled round to face her. His back was to the light but she divined rather than saw the look of pain in his eyes.

"You needn't rub it in, Moll."

"I don't mean to rub it in."

"Rub it out, then, and never refer to it again." His tone rang sharply. Its decision left no appeal.

"Very well," she returned quietly. Her heart ached for him.

"Are you starting with the politician's clean slate, Fenty?" asked Toye's clear voice behind them.

She stepped out on the balcony and regarded the two with her usual air of detached amusement. There was nothing to be read in the outline which Fenton presented, but the light which fell on her mother's face revealed cheeks unwontedly flushed and more than a suspicion of tears on her lashes.

"You look like a pair of conspirators," Toye declared. "Mother has an especially guilty air. Has she been confiding her 'orrible past to you, Fenty? If so, you've borne it wonderfully well!"

"Perhaps it's yours she has been confiding to me," returned Fenton slowly. "If the light were better, you would see that my hair has become thickly streaked with grey."

"She doesn't know it," retorted Toye. "To be a successful daughter, one's past should be wrapped in oblivion, one's present a sealed book, and one's future a glorious possibility to one's parents. Mother is only happy when she contemplates my future, aren't you, Mummy? That not impossible

day when I shall settle down in a home of my own"—her voice put mocking quotation marks round her descriptions—"after a pretty wedding in the ivy-covered church where the sniffing village children will strew my path with flowers, while my eight bridesmaids will whisper behind my back, 'What an ugly little devil she is! How on earth did she manage to catch him?' Isn't that your ideal for me, mother?"

Lady Tempest forced a smile. "I suppose it is wholesome to see oneself through another person's eyes sometimes, but I confess that I rarely recognise myself in your quotations, Toye."

"Don't I hold the mirror close enough to Nature, then? Haven't I often heard you say that you wished I was well married?"

"You have heard me say that I thought you would be happier if you were married to the right sort of man, but——"

"Dear thing, you are old-fashioned! Well, I'm afraid I can't please you. I want to enjoy life. I prefer to amuse myself rather than risk the problematical charms of matrimony."

"Can't you do both?" asked Fenton.

"Fenty among the moderns! What an up-to-date remark for you, dear!" she cried impudently. "Amusement and matrimony! Did you shed your

crinoline with your beard? By the way, mother, talking of amusement, I asked Cosmo to come to dinner to-morrow night."

"Did you? But Mrs. Fleury and Miss Gerard are coming."

"What does that matter? It will only mean one odd woman instead of two. Family parties are so dreadfully dull."

"I shouldn't call this exactly a family party."

"Near enough to want some leavening."

"Is it for Mrs. Fleury's sake that you have invited the—leaven?" asked Fenton, drily.

"Certainly not. For my own," she retorted, wrinkling up her nose at him. "Do you know what I've christened your married *ingenue*, Fenty?"

"No."

"The Sleeping Beauty. Don't you think it suits her?"

"Admirably."

Lady Tempest moved uneasily. Fenton saw the movement with some irritation. He already half-regretted his forced confidence. He knew that now Mollie would be always studying him tenderly, suffering vicariously for him, reading between the lines of the simplest incident, and the knowledge irked him. He did not want her

to be tactful. There are some bruises which the blows of ignorance hurt less than the salve of knowledge.

"Those old fairy-tales are always profoundly moral," continued Toye, with a glance at Fenton as bright and quick as a lizard's.

"What is the moral of this one?" he asked.

"That though many princes tried to get into the Enchanted Garden only the True Prince succeeded."

"There's not much moral in that," returned Fenton.

"Perhaps the real moral lies in the kiss," Toye flashed back airily. "People who know, my dear Fenty, have told me that there is a great power of awakening in a man's kiss!"

"Indeed!"

"They even go so far as to say that it may be looked upon in the light of a test."

"Of what, may I ask?"

"Of the difference between the False Prince and the True!"

With a swift pirouette she turned and disappeared leaving Fenton to wonder uncomfortably how long she had been in the *sala*, and how much she had overheard.

Though he tried to dismiss the suspicion as being

unworthy, it came back again and again, and he could not help feeling that her apparently careless words had been intended either as a hint or a warning.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE DINNER PARTY

IN spite of his hidden pain, Fenton Mede spent hours of enjoyment in Titian's company. Though honour sealed his lips, there was a sweet pain, a poignant pleasure, to be found in her nearness. He hoarded his moments in Venice as a squirrel hoards his summer store of what will mean life to him in winter days.

Together he and she and Miss Gerard journeyed to the Islands, past the pine-crowned cemetery to Murano and Burano, with their vivid huddle of gaily-coloured houses, to see the revival of the ancient arts of making lace and blowing glass.

The glow of the furnaces at Murano, the dark corners, the swarthy half-naked workers, made a Rembrandtesque contrast to the airy rooms of Burano, where happy women, twittering gaily as birds, wove fairy cobwebs of lace with dainty fingers.

Over the railings by the canals, brown nets hung.

In the doorways of the brightly-painted houses,—pink, yellow, blue, ochre,—sat dark-eyed women working at their snowy pillows. Curly-headed children ran and tumbled about the cobbled streets. A small boat was moored to a ring near the stone steps at which their gondola lay. A light breeze flapped its triangular sail of orange, barred with scarlet. For a moment, the tarry smell of the nets seemed to catch Titian in the web of the past. Fenton's slow voice heightened the illusion.

She shook off the impression with impatience. She did not want to go back; she wanted to go forward; to follow rainbow Youth—Will o' the Wisp with roseate wings. For the moment, it seemed as if Fenton had touched and shattered her bubble. She had had no magic hours since his coming, save that morning moment when his lonely soul had tried to reach hers. No one had sung of the "heaven's embroidered cloths" beneath her window; no one but Fenton himself had pressed her hand and pleaded mutely for a little kindness.

She looked forward with intense eagerness to the dinner-party at Palazzo Marin. Fenton had told her that Cosmo Trevor would be there.

Her first dinner-party! And he was to be there —the new friend who understood her so well,

whose touch, whose look brought back to her the absurd delicious thrills of youth.

Then Memory flashed two pictures from her mirror straight into Titian's dream-dazzled eyes.

One was of Fenton struggling with speech, conquering an almost irresistible reticence in order to lay bare his inmost thoughts to give her comfort. The other was his attitude of reverence when she had bowed her head to the dust before him after Arnot's will had been read. Could any man, Cosmo Trevor or another, have understood her better than he did in those two bitter hours?

Swift shame flooded her cheeks, and she talked to Fenton gently and with all her old warmth on the journey back to Venice.

They spoke of little things, small happenings, mutual memories—the innumerable tiny threads that bind the big moments of life together.

Fenton felt almost happy when he left them at the Hotel Bianca with a smiling rejoinder not to forget the dinner party at Palazzo Marin.

He was ready early and found no one in the *sala* when he entered. Candelabra on little tables thrust flowers of light into the gloom; here and there glowed the pale orange globes of lamps.

He paced up and down in his favourite fashion,

his hands clasped behind his back, his thoughts, like moths, always wandering back to Titian.

Yes, she had blossomed. She was more beautiful than ever, gayer, younger, more sweetly womanly. How lovely her hands were! How glad he was that she had not forgotten that trick of pushing back the straying chestnut lock! How would it be to feel their satin coolness on his forehead when his head ached, as it had done sometimes of late? He locked the door on the picture-gallery of his imagination. That way madness lay. It would not do. One could not tell where the visions would end.

So absorbed was he that he did not hear a light step behind him, nor was he conscious of another's presence until Toye slipped her hand through his arm.

"A penny for your thoughts, my prophetic soul," she cried gaily.

"You won't want to pay," said Fenton, swinging round and catching her by the waist.

"Why not?"

She made a vividly arresting little figure in the big half-lit room. She wore a dress of turquoise-blue veiled in sea-green. Her smooth red hair was piled high on her head and caught with a carved jade comb. Round her neck was a chain of beryls

which repeated the faint green of the jade and lay like drops of sea-water on the milky whiteness of her skin. Her eyes sparkled, her lips looked soft and red.

"I always pay my debts—when I can," she continued.

"How long were you listening inside that window to-day?"

She looked up at him with a little gasp and a queer gleam came into her eyes. Then her brightness grew suddenly veiled. Her head drooped and two slow tears forced themselves from between her light red lashes.

"How wickedly suspicious you are!" she said, with quivering mouth; her tones trembled a little.

Fenton felt very uncomfortable. He wished with all his heart that he had not yielded to impulse. He had no desire to hurt Toye. He had not even realised that she could be hurt.

She turned away; her shoulders shaking. He followed her awkwardly.

"I say, Toye, child—I didn't mean——"

She swirled round on him, her face alight with mischief, though the tears still hung on her lashes.

"Didn't you? Bless you, my Fenty, what a lovely rise! I did it well, didn't I? It's one of my gifts—a valuable one, too—being able to

pump up my tears at will!" She chuckled as she wiped away the drops with a lace-edged wisp.

Fenton, half-annoyed, half-amused, made a step towards her.

"You little——"

"Do say it, Fenty. You'll feel much better, and I shan't mind." Her diversion had been most successful. She hummed a tango-tune and made a few sliding steps, smiling up at him with her head on one side.

"You little nettle!" he exclaimed. "Why do you always sting everyone who touches you, Toye?"

"I suppose because no one as yet has had the courage to 'grasp me like a man of mettle,'" she rejoined, bending one knee to the ground in search of a new pose.

"Haven't they? Here goes, then!"

Fenton caught her by the waist, swung her through the air and perched her up on the high marble mantelpiece whose ledge was some six feet from the ground.

"Fenty!" she cried. "Take me down at once."

Fenton backed until he was out of reach. "Certainly not. There you stay until you apologise for the trick you played on me, young lady."

"Fenty, you're a beast!"

"Yes?"

"You're not going to leave me here until they all come, are you?"

"Certainly, unless you apologise."

"Fenty, don't you know that it is better to be stung by a nettle than pricked by a rose?"

"Is it?"

"You might take me down. I'd jump only that I'm afraid of spraining my ankle."

"That would be a pity," said Fenton nonchalantly. "You've fairly decent ankles."

"Yes, my extremities are quite good," she said, swinging her little feet and spreading out her tapering fingers. "You might take me down, Fenty."

"I might, but I shan't," Fenton answered, putting his hands in his pockets. "Unless you apologise."

"I'll see you hanged first!"

"You don't like to be laughed at. Neither do I. The experience will be salutary for you. Here's the first arrival."

The door of the *sala* opened to admit Lady Tempest.

"Ah, you're down, Fenty. I thought I heard you talking to someone." She peered forward.

Fenton laughed. "You did. I was talking to Toye. There she is!"

Lady Tempest looked and found her.

"Toye! My dear child, how ridiculous of you! Do come down. Mrs. Fleury will be here in a moment."

Toye settled herself more comfortably on her marble shelf. Her mother's remonstrance changed her attitude. After all, she might be the means of making Fenton look ridiculous in the eyes of his beloved—silly, antiquated, old-fashioned Fenty! How dare he pick her up and put her on the mantelpiece as if she were a china ornament! How dare he treat her like a baby!

"My dear mother," she said coolly, "it is your beloved brother whom you should scold and not me. It was Fenty who put me here."

Lady Tempest turned to him.

"She's telling the truth for once, Mollie. She played a nasty trick on me, and I perched her there as a punishment until she says she's sorry."

"With your regard for the truth, Fenty, I cannot imagine why you should wish to force me to tell a deliberate lie!"

"But, Fenty!" Lady Tempest began.

The door opened again. Titian and Miss Gerard entered. Toye had an uninterrupted view of the two as they came up the room.

Miss Gerard looked festive, her asperities soft-

ened by a grey chiffon gown and a pink rose, but Titian was radiantly beautiful in her filmy black draperies. She wore no ornaments but her platinum chain and the plaque set with emeralds. Toye noted the odd coincidence of their both having chosen green stones to wear that evening. She touched her pale beryls. Their lack of colour seemed to emphasise by contrast the physical differences between her and Titian. She caught her breath for a moment at the sheer triumphant loveliness of the other. Then she reflected with a swift touch of satisfaction that at least Titian's skin was no whiter than her own.

"Hullo, Mrs. Fleury, how do you admire the new drawing-room ornament?" she called gaily. Fenty should not have the satisfaction of thinking that he had made her feel ridiculous, at any rate.

Titian looked up with a smile.

"Is this the newest craze?" she asked.

"The very newest," Toye responded. "It was a brain-wave on the part of Fenty. He thought that the mantelpiece looked rather bare, *et voilá!*"

"A very charming ornament," said Titian. She laughed as she turned to greet Sir Hugh. Something in her look and tone pricked Toye to annoyance. She felt suddenly hoydenish. Yet Titian was conscious of admiring the girl's non-

chalance as she half-lay along the mantelpiece in a graceful attitude, supporting herself by one slim hand.

Toye's face darkened a little as Cosmo Trevor entered, paying his devoirs as he came up the room.

She moved impatiently, swinging her feet. The motion caught his eyes.

"Why, Toye! San Toye on a pedestal! Ye gods and little fishes, what a spectacle!"

"I'm not posing as a new deity, Cosmo, so there is no need for you to take fright!" Her tone was tinged with irony. In her heart burned rage against Fenton, but she was not going to let him see that she cared. She hated Titian for her air of detached amusement. She almost hated Cosmo for smiling.

"I'm tired of being so far from human-kind. Take me down."

"Let me enjoy the sight for a moment longer. Who was the hero who put you there?"

"Fenty."

"Good man, Fenty. Fenton Mede, sir, I salute you. I'll head the subscription list for a National Monument to you."

"That's all right," said Fenton shortly. He was beginning to tire of his joke.

Toye looked down at her feet; she felt glad that they were so small. The satin-shod toes that peeped from beneath Titian's skirt showed much ampler proportions.

"If you have all quite finished being witty at my expense you might take me down. Please, Cosmo," she said, closing her eyes until they looked like glittering greenish slits, and holding out her hands.

Titian was reminded of the singing-girl's expression on that unforgettable night. Something in Toye's face seemed to melt for a moment as Cosmo came up to her.

"Put your hands on my shoulders and let me get mine on your waist," he said. There was no emotion in his tone, but his grasp tightened on her soft body as she slid towards him and slipped through his arms to the ground, a little breathless, but still defiant.

At the sight a swift pang shot through Titian. Primitive woman awoke and stirred, and the emotion was not pleasant. Why should it rouse resentment within her to see Cosmo Trevor help the girl to the ground? Could this stab of pain really be caused by that meanest of all vices, jealousy?

She looked up confusedly to find Fenton's eyes

fixed upon her, and turned away with a sense of annoyance.

Sir Hugh was at her side with extended arm. She took it with a little sigh of relief and they went in to dinner.

At dinner, Cosmo Trevor put forth all his powers to please. For a while, Toye sat silent with a half-sulky, half-mutinous look about her mouth; then she shook off her annoyance with a little shrug of her bare milk-white shoulders and became her flippant, impudent self once more.

Titian, with carmine cheeks, talked to Sir Hugh with forced lightness, charming him anew. She was animated, even gay. She was learning the ways of her world quickly. Fenton at her other side was unusually responsive to her mood. It was rather dear of him, she thought.

When the meal was over, Toye held out her hand for Cosmo's cigarette-case.

"I left my own upstairs. Do you smoke, Mrs. Fleury?"

"No," Titian answered.

"What a portentous no!" laughed Toye. "I'm sure you disapprove of the habit, though. The really good woman always does."

"Does she?" answered Titian simply, ignoring the desire to sting. "I really haven't thought

about it. Still, it's charming of you to credit me with a goodness which perhaps I may not deserve."

"It's an old-fashioned quality," put in Fenton quietly, "and so it doesn't appeal to Toye."

"What about the really good man?" asked Cosmo, glancing at Fenton.

Toye's tone was vicious. "He doesn't exist, or if he does he's always a fool."

"Really, Toye, you're talking hopeless nonsense," said Lady Tempest, rising.

Cosmo opened the door for them. As Toye passed, he murmured in her ear:

"Simplicity knows some of the moves in the game at any rate."

"Of course, the queen can do no wrong," Toye, snapped. "As for Fenty, I'd like to smack his face."

"What a joy it would be to see you attempt it!"

The girl's eyes seemed to shoot sparks like a cat's. Then she laughed. "He did not realise how he was giving himself away when he shaved off his beard. He's a sphinx without a secret now."

"Is he, too, as transparent as a sheet of glass?"

"All men are transparent if you look at them from the right angle."

"What's that?"

"I don't want to be a sphinx without a secret," she answered, slipping away after the others.

Lady Tempest and Miss Gerard sat near one of the lamps, both heads bent over an intricate pattern in knitting. Titian was in her favourite carved chair, a little apart from them.

Toye glanced at her as she went to the piano and ran her fingers over the keys in a *pianissimo* chromatic scale.

"Do you sing, Mrs. Fleury?" she asked over her shoulder.

"No."

"You should have added, 'Only in church or in my bath!' That's the formula for people who say they are fond of music but don't sing."

Titian gave an amused laugh. "I confess that I had never before thought of my bath as a place wherein I could lift up my voice. I am in your debt."

Toye swerved round on the piano-stool and looked at her with a franker interest. It was as if she measured swords now where before she had been content to leave hers in its scabbard. The Sleeping Beauty was beginning to awaken. Here was food for thought.

"Sing something, Toye," said her mother.

"I will when Cosmo comes. No one can play my accompaniments as he does."

"He will come when he hears the sound of music."

Toye did not answer, but after playing aimlessly for a second or two her wanderings crystallised into the prelude of a song.

## CHAPTER XIII

### ON THE BALCONY

TITIAN was conscious of a half-reluctant shock of delight when Toye, lifting her head, broke into song. Her voice bubbled from her throat as easily as a bird's does; like a bird's too, it was high and clear and almost piercingly sweet. The words had a familiar ring. Suddenly she remembered that she had come across them in one of Fenton's little vellum-covered books at Camus. It was the *Echo Song* of Gauradas, set to a rippling tune that was sweet and elusive as the nymph herself.

"Echo, echo, are you here?
(Here, did echo cry)
Doth my lover hold me dear?
(Dear, she made reply).

"Comes the hour of gladness nigh?
(Nigh, quoth echo gay)
Say her faithful swain and I
(Aye, she seemed to say).

"Gifts of love and pledges true,
These she shall not lack;
Who should carry them save you?
(You, she whispered back).

"Echo, echo, if I go,
Shall I be denied?
Tell me this, for you must know.
(No, the echo cried)."

It was a dainty performance and Toye gave the echoed words with exquisite purity.

"How delicious!" cried Titian when the last echo had faded up to the painted ceiling. "I know the words, but where did you find such a perfect setting?"

There was real warmth in her tone.

"The setting's Cosmo's," returned Toye carelessly. "The song is really a man's, but I took a fancy to it, and as it suits my voice much better than his, I invariably sing it whenever he's about, so as to prevent him from doing so."

"Amiable!" remarked Miss Gerard quite audibly. She thoroughly disapproved of Toye, and took no pains to conceal her opinion.

"It's kinder than you think, perhaps, Miss Gerard," said Toye, who was quite aware of the fact, and rather enjoyed the knowledge than otherwise. "It's too high for Cosmo, and he

doesn't do the echo part a bit nicely. Do you, Cossie?" she asked, swinging round on the piano-stool as the men came in.

"Am I supposed to say yes, or no?" he asked, drawing a chair towards where Titian sat.

"Come, my good youth, you're not going to be let off like that," she said. "Here have I been waiting for you to come in to play the accompaniment to a little ditty which expresses the views of Mother and Dad and Fenty on the whole Sex Problem (including the Feminist Movement) in a nutshell."

"What's the name of the encyclopædic lay?" asked Cosmo, his hand still on the back of the chair.

Titian gave a side-glance at him to see what he would do, but she did not raise her eyes from the plaque which she was twirling round and round on its chain. She would not lift a finger to keep him near her if he did not wish to stay.

Fenton stood near the piano, lifting sheets of music and studying them with eyes that saw nothing but the black-robed figure in the carved chair and the green glints from the twirling jewel.

"It's *The Auld Wife!* I know Fenty will love it," said Toye. "Be agreeable for once in your short life, Cosmo, and come and play it."

"With pleasure," he returned, taking his hand reluctantly from the chair. "It is sweet to hear you ask instead of order, Toye. I'm sure we all owe your Uncle Fenty a debt of gratitude."

Fenton moved abruptly as Cosmo came up to the piano. For a moment the two men stood side by side.

It was the first time that Titian had had a chance of actual comparison. She used to think that Fenton looked rather nice in evening dress. Now she saw that the firm line of cheek and chin and the repressed sadness of his beautiful mouth won distinction for him. Beside his strength, Cosmo looked a dapper exquisite.

Fenton crossed to her side and sat in the chair which Cosmo had left vacant. Something in his look smote her to sudden pity.

"Tired, Fenty?" she asked softly, as Toye began to sing.

Toye acted the little ballad with verve and point. It was amusing to watch as well as to listen to her.

"Whustle, whustle, ye auld wife,
An' I'll gie ye a hen!"
"I couldna whustle for ma life,
Gin ye wad gie me ten."

"Whustle, whustle, ye auld wife,
An' I'll gie ye a cock."

"I couldna whustle for ma life,
Gin ye gie me a flock!"

"Whustle, whustle, ye auld wife
An' I'll gie ye a *man!*"
"Whe-e-w! Whe-e-w! Whe-e-w!"

(Here Toye pursed up her lips in a mock attempt to whistle)

"I'll whustle all I can!"

The applause which greeted her effort was unforced. Even Miss Gerard relaxed. Now that Toye was in the mood for music her energies were untiring. Song followed song, and when her voice flagged, she made Cosmo take her place. But his singing to-night held no thrill for Titian. She enjoyed it from an artistic point of view, but it was a pleasure that lacked glamour.

When Toye had had enough she whirled him off the piano-stool.

"Now for the tango," she cried. "Mummy, come and play *El Choclo.*"

She drew Cosmo into a clear space and stood with her hands on his shoulders, waiting for the music to begin. She did not care whether anyone else wanted to see the tango or not. She wished to dance it, that was enough. Over her shoulder

she flung a glance at Titian. The eyes of the two women met, and Titian read defiance in Toye's look. It was as if she said: "This is my playfellow, not yours. He always has been mine—always will be mine. I came first. Hands off!"

"I came first!" That was written in every supple curve of the bending body, of the red lips, of the smooth hair rising above the carved jade comb.

Something in Titian rose to the challenge. She remembered the odd power which her beauty had wielded over Arnot. For the first time, she recognised it as a weapon of woman against woman. For the first time also, she felt glad that she was beautiful—glad with the swift surge of that primitive passion of which her inner consciousness was somehow ashamed.

As the dancers lost themselves in the pleasure of their woven paces, as they swayed backwards and forwards in their magic circle of gold and orange light, sending their shadows flickering, now to, now from the watchers on the outskirts, Titian had once more the lonely feeling of being thrust outside a fairy ring. This time the sensation was shot with a swift determination to get inside it which made her incline graciously towards Fenton when he touched her arm and said softly:

"Come out on the balcony for a moment, will you?"

Without a word, she rose noiselessly and followed him to the open window. He stood aside to let her pass, and she went out into the night beneath the wide immensity of the star-pricked sky.

It was dark and clear. The stars seemed small and bright and very far away. The distant lamplight threw a suffused glow on the balcony.

"What is it, Fenty?" she asked gently, leaning over the parapet and looking down to the velvet blackness of the canal, whose lapping waters were scarcely visible.

Through the open window came the sound of music and the "whisper-whisper" of sliding feet. It seemed as if in one instant they had stepped from a world of colour and movement into a solitude of shadowy darkness.

Titian shivered a little. "Did you want to say anything particular to me?"

"No. Yes. I don't know," answered Fenton, leaning against the balcony and putting his hands in his pockets.

He had been a fool to touch her bare arm, he told himself. The contact with its smoothness had sent fire through his veins. It was folly to awaken needs which might never know fulfilment.

For one mad moment, he wondered what would happen if he caught her in his arms and tried Toye's test. Would his kiss have power to awaken her, or was that boon for Cosmo or some other pleasant trifler? No, he told himself, clenching his hands. It would need a man to arouse her true womanhood. In his inmost being, he felt that he could be that man, just as he knew that she was the one woman for him. But it was his part to stand aside and see others woo her. Honour, that most impalpable and indestructible of chains, held him fast bound.

"You're rather vague, Fenty," she said.

Fenton curbed himself to answer in ordinary tones.

"The fact is that I wanted to have you to myself for a little. I wanted to get away from those exuberant youngsters. They were beginning to bore me."

"Oh, were they?" Her voice was cold.

In that one phrase, he seemed to put her on the plane of his own middle-age, to shut her out once for all from the charmed circle of youth. Exuberant youngsters! He bracketed them together in imagination, setting her aside. Hot tears suddenly welled into her eyes. It was cruel of Fenty to rob her of her new-found youth.

"Do you want to go back?" he asked wistfully.

The light from the window fell softly upon her waves of hair and the line of her shoulders.

"I? Oh, no. It is—very quiet out here."

"And you like quiet?"

"I don't. I hate it. I'm sick of it!" she broke forth. "I've had nothing but quiet all my life until now."

He moved quickly. "I'm sorry. Let's go in."

She turned and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Oh, no, Fenty, don't be stupid," she cried petulantly. She could not face the light again until the tears had dried on her lashes.

He leaned back against the balcony rail.

"I'm afraid I am stupid," he said patiently. "You must put up with me, Titian. You see, I don't profess to understand women. I know so few. Only Mollie and—you."

"We're different types, at any rate," she answered, touching her wet eyelashes surreptitiously to remove the drops.

"You are." Then he asked suddenly. "Do you agree with Toye that all good men are fools?"

"I—don't know," she replied, a little startled by the intensity of the question.

"Think, then. It's time you learned to think. You've got to think out heaps of things for your-

self. Only you yourself can live your own life. Only you yourself can worry out your own Whys and Wherefores. No one else is any use."

"Fenty, why do you always find fault with me?"

"I find fault with you?" he cried under his breath. He moved farther into the shadows. He did not want her to see his face. "I'm not finding fault with you, child," he said gently. "I only want to help you if I can. Tell me, do you think a man is a fool who puts honour above all considerations?"

"Certainly not."

"Above his one chance of happiness?"

"No, indeed."

"I wish I could be sure that you understand what you are saying," he said with a stifled sigh.

"How can I when you talk in riddles?" she asked.

"I can't help it, Titian," he answered. "The world's an odd place and man is the queerest animal in it."

"I quite agree with you there."

Silence fell between them. From the room behind, the music still sounded gaily, though the sliding steps had ceased. Murmurs of voices, snatches of instruction, a trill of laughter from Toye floated through the open window.

Titian stirred impatiently. She had no desire to be a looker-on at life. She did not want to stay moping here with Fenty in the shadows, especially when he had grown so cross and queer.

"I haven't offended you?" he asked humbly.

"Oh, no."

"I was afraid I had."

"It isn't like you to be so meek, Fenty," she said, with a little laugh.

The sound hurt. He felt very lonely, very unhappy.

"Isn't it?" He went on with difficulty. "You see I want you to give me a—a pleasant memory for my—for my——"

"For your what, Fenty?" she asked.

"For my last evening," he blurted out.

"Your last evening?"

"Yes. I must get back to England to-morrow."

"Why? Oh, I am sorry."

"Business of various sorts," he answered shortly. "I didn't tell you sooner because—well, because I didn't want to spoil the day." As he spoke he felt miserably that the knowledge would not have spoiled the day for her.

Her heart melted. She laid her hand on his arm.

"What pleasant memory can I give you, Fenty? Tell me. I'll do anything you like. Would you

like to come out in the gondola? You haven't been on the Grand Canal at night. It's entrancing.

There was nothing in her tone but the sweetest friendliness.

Entrancing! Yes, it would be that. Out in the darkness of the scented night, he and she, alone beneath the stars. Too entrancing for him.

"No," he answered. His throat was dry. He could not trust himself to say more.

"What then?" she queried.

"Nothing," he said, turning abruptly. "I think we'd better get back to the others."

"You are a stupid old Fenty," she said, with a puzzled smile, stepping into the light. Her eyes were quite dry now.

"Yes," he answered, following her.

The tango was over, the dancers flushed and smiling. He avoided the kind anxiety of Mollie's look.

## CHAPTER XIV

### LOVE WITHOUT WINGS

"MODERN manners," said Miss Gerard, "leave much to be desired."

"We haven't seen enough of them to be able to judge," answered Titian, putting down her cup.

"You didn't see the way that little hussy danced last night," Miss Gerard continued. "You had the good sense to go out on the balcony with Mr. Mede, delightful man!"

Deep down in Titian's heart lurked a feeling of regret for Fenton; she feared that she had not been nice enough to him. His little holiday was so short, poor old Fenty, and now he was gone and she could not make it up to him. It was good to be with him; she wished that he could have stayed longer.

"I expect he was disgusted at his niece's performance. Such antics I never saw! And then her brazenness, cocked up on the mantelpiece!" continued Miss Gerard.

"It was Fenton who put her there, Miss Em."

"Of course. That sort of girl always provokes a man to do that sort of thing to her. How well she waited for Mr. Trevor to take her down!"

Titian flushed at the remembrance of the scene. She felt a little tired this afternoon. A feeling of flatness pervaded her day. A cloud, albeit a small one, seemed to have arisen between her and Fenty, and Cosmo Trevor appeared to be in no hurry to renew that pleasant companionship which had added such a new savour to life. Miss Em's comments were too prejudiced to be amusing. Venice had certainly lost some of its sparkle.

"Will you have some more tea, Miss Em?"

"No, thank you. Shall I ring to have the things taken away?"

"Please," said Titian listlessly.

"She is lonely without Mr. Mede," thought Miss Gerard. "Ah, I wonder—" As she wondered, her sharp forefinger pressed the electric button in time to an imaginary wedding-march, and she came back to the tea-table with a smile on her thin lips.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked. "I'm half-thinking of going out to buy some of those coloured postcards of the Lido which we saw this morning. Would you care to come too?"

"No, thanks. I don't think so. I think I'll read for a little. I've hardly opened a book since I came to Venice."

She rose as she spoke and went over to a table which held some books.

"Very well, I won't urge you," said Miss Gerard, "but it seems a pity to be indoors this glorious afternoon."

"I'll go out on the balcony presently."

She turned over the books. None of them appealed to her present mood. She was not in the humour for the calm philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, the brave self-satisfaction of Cellini, or the delicate allusiveness of Lucas. The Tauchnitz novels she dismissed as being unreal—no novel that she had ever read was anything like life as she knew it; no imaginary characters thought or felt as she did. Poetry was too romantic; she was out of tune with the joyous paganism of old Omar.

The waiter, Giuseppe, who had flown upstairs at the imperative instance of Miss Gerard's hymeneal summons, lingered for a moment.

"The *signora* requires nothing more?"

"Nothing, thank you, Giuseppe."

"The *signora* receives?"

"Yes, if anyone calls."

She pushed aside the books discontentedly and walked to the window which opened on the balcony. Beneath her moved the water-life, gay and varied as ever. To-day it held no appeal. She wondered why. Was it she who had changed? If so, what had changed her? She did not quite know. She would not admit any obvious reason.

A sound behind her made her turn—a voice saying in soft Venetian accents:

"*Il signore Trevóre, miladi.*"

Cosmo Trevor came across the room towards her. His face was alight.

Her own brightened in response.

"How good of you to see me," he said, taking her hand in a quick possessive grasp. "I had not a word with you last night. You were very unkind. I had sad dreams all night."

"Had you? Poor you!" she laughed softly. "I was just going to sit out on the balcony and read, but I couldn't find anything that I cared about. Will you come and sit out too, or would you rather stay here?"

"I would much rather be on the balcony—with you," he said, stepping out after her.

The afternoon sun sent golden shafts across the green water; the vivid reflections of the scarlet and white *palle* beneath swayed like giant petals upon

the ripples. Swifts screamed and darted. A gondola with striped awning went by; its two rowers had orange sashes bound about their waists.

Titian drew a long breath.

It really was a glorious evening. Miss Em was quite right; it was too good to be wasted indoors. She pulled forward a low wooden chair with carved arms and sat down.

Cosmo Trevor leaned against the edge of the marble parapet and looked down at her. Certainly she was very good to look at, and her trick of flushing and paling made her seem strangely young. There was a certain fascination in calling up and watching for her lovely blush.

"Now give an account of yourself, most beautiful lady," he said, with a quick look from his handsome grey eyes.

"An account of myself?" she queried.

"Why did you desert us last night? Why did you leave me to expend my utmost store of energy in dancing with the irrepressible Toye?"

"I thought that was what you wished to do." She laughed as she glanced up at him. Life had suddenly grown amusing again.

"Did you indeed?" he asked softly. "I admired the masterly way in which Fenton engineered your retreat."

"I didn't think you noticed," she exclaimed simply.

"Didn't you? I notice most things, Mrs. Fleury. I am a most observant person."

"I think you must be."

"I envied Fenton last night. All the time that I was treading the mazy tango I was consumed with a burning desire to rush out on the balcony and bundle the offending Fenty, neck and crop, into the canal."

"Were you?" she said, veiling her eyes. "I wonder why?" The impossibility of the feat gave her a feeling of pleasure.

He bent towards her. "Do you really wonder why? I think you must know. Of course, I wanted you to be nice to me instead of to Fenton."

"But I wasn't," she cried remorsefully. "I really was rather horrid to him."

"Were you? What a relief! I wish I had known that last night."

"Why?"

"I shouldn't have had such sad dreams," he answered, smiling down at her.

What lovely limpid eyes she had, clear and brown as mountain streams! What a soft, lovable mouth! He felt a sudden desire to kiss it. He would too, some day.

He bent a little closer.

"Is this the balcony?" he asked.

"The balcony?" she echoed. For a moment, she did not know what he meant.

Then the steady fire of his gaze enlightened her and her cheeks flamed beneath it.

"Ah, I see you remember now," he said caressingly. "I was afraid for one horrible moment that you had forgotten, though I had no right to hope for remembrance. You are very gracious. It was—rather an impertinence on my part."

"Oh, no," she said in soft hurried tones. "Oh, no."

"Shall I tell you what I saw that evening when the moon shone out so suddenly?"

"Yes, if you like," she returned, feeling oddly shy. Her breath came faster, her pulses quickened as they had done on the night of which he spoke. It was as if he gave her back the gift of youth which Fenty had seemed to snatch away.

"I saw a goddess in a flood of silver light, a goddess draped in the mantle of the night edged with a drift of cloud. I saw a beautiful rapt face as far above me as the stars, a neck of snow, aloof as the moon in its whiteness. Then in answer to my song the goddess became a woman. With

divine generosity she rewarded her minstrel with a flower."

His voice had sunk to a passionate whisper. Speech had no difficulty for him. His very murmurs wooed.

"Stop!" cried Titian. "It—was an accident. I didn't really mean to give you those flowers. They slipped out of my dress when I leaned over."

"What does it matter? They were yours. They came to me warm from you. That is all I care about."

He moved nearer to her, his eyes glowing.

She felt a sudden shy fear. She pushed back her chair. It grated on the marble.

Cosmo passed his hand over his smooth hair, and gave a little embarrassed laugh.

"Forgive me, most beautiful lady," he said. "You go to my head like wine."

"I—you mustn't say such things," she breathed.

"Don't you like to hear them?"

"Yes, but——"

He laughed softly. "If I mustn't say them, you mustn't provoke them."

"But how do I provoke them?" she asked innocently.

"Look in your mirror for the answer," he said.

To his surprise, his glance found her face clouded.

"Is it always to be that?" she said, half to herself. "Will no one ever like me for anything but the outside me?"

He responded instantly to her change of mood. In some ways, he was as intuitive as a woman.

"The outward you is the lovely inevitable expression of the inward you," he said quickly. "They are indivisible. He who loves one must of necessity love the other.

"I was not talking of love," she answered, leaning her chin on her hand.

"Were you not? Like is a cold word. It has no colour." Cosmo embarked once more upon his favourite pastime of playing with fire.

Deep down in Titian's heart, something stirred, something which sounded a warning to her to keep the game on the level of a game. One might play earnestly, even seriously, so long as one remembered that it was but a game, but danger lay in the chance of forgetting that it was only play.

Her womanhood turned in its sleep. There was a fuller note in her voice when she spoke, a note which only sounded when she was moved. She put aside his counters with a gesture.

"We will not talk of love, if you don't mind," she said gently. "Love is too big a thing to be laughed at."

"I am too good an amorist to laugh at love," he began. Then he stopped abruptly as he met a dawning question in her eyes.

Seeing that something in his phrase had jarred, he hastened to efface the impression.

"I have brought you an unworthy offering," he said, going back into the sitting-room and returning with a parcel, which he put into her hands. "You honoured me before by promising to accept it."

He cut the string and left her the pleasure of opening it. The unfolding paper revealed two little volumes printed on thin paper and beautifully bound in deep green leather tooled with a design of pomegranates.

Titian gave an exclamation of pleasure.

"You like them?" he asked. "I did not need to have them specially bound after all. By the greatest good fortune, I came across them in a shop this morning."

*The Letters of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.* As Titian's fingers caressed the smoothness of the leather, her thoughts flew back to Fenton's comment on this very book.

"Those two knew what a big thing Love is," continued Cosmo softly.

"Yes," she answered, still thinking.

"There are latitudes in Love," he pursued tentatively. "There are the warm valleys as well as the mountain peaks. It is not given to all to attain the heights. I was lucky to find these already bound in green."

"Why?"

"I wanted to have them bound in green to match this,"—he touched her emerald ring and with it her finger—"and this." He took the plaque in his hand and kept it there. "Also I wanted to see a green book in your white hands."

"Did you?"

It was the sort of thing which Arnot might have said. A colour scheme which he might have evolved for his own sybaritic pleasure. For an instant her soul quailed within her. Her bitter knowledge of Arnot threw a searchlight on his type. Were all men like that, mere worshippers of the beautiful external? Pain mingled with her pleasure.

She felt the faintest pull at the platinum chain. Cosmo had drawn it to its fullest length. She felt as if he were slowly, slowly drawing her to him by a thinner, less palpable chain. Their eyes met. His look confused her. Her qualms melted beneath it to give place to a sweeter troubling.

She ran her fingers along the chain until they

reached the emerald plaque and touched his, trembling slightly.

"Please," she said softly, looking away from him.

"Very well," he said, answering her averted look rather than her word. He drew a long breath that was half a sigh as he released the chain.

"I must go," he exclaimed, as one who makes a sudden and necessary resolution.

"Why?"

"Because the Wine of Life might prove too strong for me if I stayed," he answered, taking her hand in his.

"Good-bye, then, and thank you for these." She touched the green books in her lap.

"Not good-bye. *A rivederci*," he murmured, kissing the hand he held.

Turning abruptly from the sunshine to the comparative dusk of the room inside, he almost collided with Toye, who was coming in.

"Why, Cosmo, is that you?" she cried, surveying him keenly. "You seem to be in a great hurry. Did you see me coming and think you would escape before I saw you or what?"

"What!" said Cosmo shortly. He had the uncomfortable feeling of a child who is caught.

"I suppose you were trying to console Mrs. Fleury for the loss of Fenty. The same laudable idea occurred to me. We must be twin souls, my Cossie."

"I thought that I had told you not to call me that."

"Asked would be a better word. What shall I call you, then? Cosmo *mio?*"

"Anything but that odious diminutive."

"Cosmo *mio*," she repeated. "That would be a good thing to say before you were photographed. Try it. Say it very quickly. Cosmo *mio*, Osmo mio, Smo mio, Mo mio, Mio, Io, O!"

Cosmo muttered something inaudible.

"It would leave your mouth quite a pretty shape. Quite kissable, eh Cossie? I think I'll teach it to Mrs. Fleury. I'm sure she'd look perfectly adorable after saying Cosmo *mio*—" She rattled off the inane string again, pursing her own mouth at the "O!"

"You little devil!" murmured Cosmo politely, evading her pirouetting form and making his escape.

"What are you going to teach me?" asked Titian, coming in from the balcony.

"I was only teasing Cosmo," laughed Toye. "He took it very badly. I suppose the sudden

contrast between you and me was too much for him. You never tease him, do you, Mrs. Fleury?"

"I don't think that teasing is my *métier*," returned Titian. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks. I will for a moment. I found that mother had written a letter to you, and as I was in an energetic mood I volunteered to bring it and save her a penny, or is it a half-penny here in Venice? It's only some old address or other which she forgot to give you last night."

Titian took the letter. "Thanks. It was good of you to bring it."

"Wasn't it, very?" Toye wrinkled up her nose. "I'm an obliging little darling, aren't I? When are you coming to take lessons in the tango, Mrs. Fleury? Cosmo and I are burning to teach you."

Cosmo and I! She was being thrust out again.

Her fingers sought the emerald plaque and caressed it secretly. After all, she had her own magic circle—a circle of sunlight and moonlight. It was Toye who had only the lamplight one.

"I'm afraid I haven't sufficient energy to learn."

"We made Miss Gerard's hair stand on end last night," Toye chuckled. "It wasn't disapproval, was it, that made you lure Fenty out on the balcony?"

"It was Fenty who lured me," answered Titian calmly.

"One to you, Mrs. Fleury. Poor old Fenty, one quite misses him."

"I thought you detested him."

"I'm an adept at concealing my feelings, aren't I? Fenty and I may dissemble our love, but we've quite a sneaking regard for each other all the same. Fenty is a jolly long sight the best man I know."

"I thought that you considered all good men fools."

"So they are, but that doesn't detract from their goodness. It makes them a little duller perhaps, but, Lord! excitement isn't everything."

"Isn't it?"

"It means a lot to you just now, doesn't it, Mrs. Fleury?" Toye countered shrewdly. "Fenty managed to pack most of his into his early life."

"Did he?"

"His wife has been in a lunatic asylum for years, a private one of course, but it's all the same. She was a hopeless dipsomaniac. Her people knew it and they let Fenty marry her. He was only a boy, twenty-two, and she was years older. They were glad to get rid of her, and took advantage of his boyish infatuation."

"Do you think that Fenton would like you to tell me this?"

"Why not? There's no secret about it. I wonder he didn't tell you himself. She's dying now, thank goodness! Didn't Fenty mention it to you last night?"

"No," Titian answered, rising abruptly. Her action was meant as a dismissal. For the moment, she felt that she did not care whether she were rude or not. She only knew that she could not stand Toye's presence any longer.

Toye rose too, and held out her hand.

"I must be off," she said. Her green eyes twinkled maliciously. "I only hope that the wretched Adela won't be like Charles the First, or Cromwell, or Thomas à Becket, or whoever it was who had to apologise because he took so long in dying. I want poor old Fenty to have a little happiness before my own grey hairs go down in sorrow to the grave."

Titian looked at the girl searchingly for an instant.

"You think Fenton isn't happy?"

"Did he look happy last night?"

Titian thought of his worn face, his sad mouth, and shook her head. "What happiness do you wish for him?"

"A real wife and a real home of his own," Toye returned. "Not startlingly original, eh?"

"No," Titian answered.

A vision of Fenton's face when he had told her that Camus was his only home flashed before her. Some perception of what his life must have meant to a home-loving man smote her to silence. She wished that Toye would go. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts. Life had quickened in her to-day. It was a good world after all. A world in which one might always keep a light burning for a friend. A world in which one must always play the game.

When Toye had gone, she left an atmosphere of unrest behind her. Titian went back to the balcony, lifted Cosmo's books from the chair and sat down with them in her lap.

Her words to him rang in her ears.

"Love is too big a thing to laugh at."

How did she know that? Who had taught her that crude expression of an elemental truth? She had not learned it from Arnot's feeling for her nor from hers for him. His passion had been too earth-bound to wander from the warm valleys; hers too feeble to climb far by itself.

It was not from Cosmo that she had learned it either. He attracted her strongly. There was a

magnetism about him. He made her feel his presence, but——. He had called himself an amorist. Amorist! That meant a lover, not of one but of many. Her brows drew together at the thought. It was distinctly unpleasing.

Of all the men whom she knew there remained only Fenton. How could he have taught her anything of the inner meaning of love? The only love of his of which she was aware had been called a boyish infatuation. That belonged to love in the caterpillar stage. It certainly was love without wings.

Love with Wings!

She drew a long breath. Some deeper instinct told her that of those whom she had passed in review Fenton was the only one who really knew what wingèd Love—Love Triumphant—might mean.

Dear Fenty! She hoped that some day he would find a woman who would be able to mount to the heights with him, who would not want to clip the wings of his love. But did she? What woman would be good enough for Fenty? He had said that he knew only two, and she was one.

After a little, she opened the book and began to read. The phrases were glowing, intimate, purely personal.

A flood of colour flamed over face and throat. Suddenly she realised what Fenty had meant. She felt as if she were doing a dishonourable act, and closed the book hastily.

"They should have been kept sacred," she said.

She rose and locked the two little volumes away.

# BOOK III

## CHAPTER I

### MISS GERARD IS ANGRY

CAMUS again after what seemed to Titian a veritable Odyssey.

She felt a strife of pain and pleasure within her when she caught sight of its old grey walls through the wind-shaven trees of the avenue.

The Virginia creeper was in full leaf now and hung in tapering trails of deep green over wall and courtyard. The memory of her first homecoming came sharply back to her. This time it was Miss Gerard who sat beside her, and not her mother. This time she drove in the motor-car, not in the carriage. This time there was no big kindly figure waiting to welcome her on the steps.

The sunshine seemed paler, less radiant than the Southern brilliance which she had left behind her. The first freshness of summer had left the trees. They looked dark, and of a uniform sombre

green, unbroken by any feathery spring lightness.

The place seemed empty, lifeless. There was no one to greet them, no one, apparently, to mark their coming.

Titian felt a waft of unutterable loneliness as the car drew up before the silent house.

As if a spell had been broken, the place seemed suddenly to come to life.

Mrs. Brooke, the portly housekeeper, bustled forth upon the steps, servants became visible, and like a ruddy flash Rufus bounded to meet her, crouching his silken length upon the ground and springing upwards to lick her cheek in ecstasy.

In the hall, Bibi arched a soft grey back and raised a plumy tail in greeting.

"Your train must have been up to time, ma'am," said Mrs. Brooke, "or else Smith must have driven very quickly. I asked him to sound the horn so that we might know when you were coming."

"I suppose he forgot. It doesn't matter," said Titian, looking with new eyes at her old surroundings.

"Those chauffeurs are all the same, ma'am," Mrs. Brooke continued, lowering her voice confidentially. "A stuck-up lot, thinking of nothing but themselves."

Titian laughed. "Is there any news, Mrs Brooke?"

"Mr. Mede was here yesterday to see that everything was in order. He's making great improvements in the village, under your instructions, ma'am."

"Under my instructions?"

"So he says, ma'am, and indeed the people are very grateful. He desired me to say to you that he was very sorry not to be here to welcome you to-day, but he was called away on business last night and was not sure when he would be back. He said he would be over the first moment he could."

Titian felt a little glow. So Fenton had not forgotten after all. She wondered if the business were in connection with his poor mad wife. It was just like Fenty to think of her comfort in the midst of his own trouble. She wished that she had been nicer to him in Venice.

"I've ordered tea in your sitting-room, ma'am," continued Mrs. Brooke. "I thought it would be more cosy there than in the big drawing-room."

"Quite right. I shall be glad of a cup of tea, won't you, Miss Em?"

"I won't say 'no 'to it, at any rate," said Miss Gerard, unpinning her motor veil.

"There are letters for you and Miss Gerard in the sitting-room, ma'am."

"Letters! That sounds exciting," said Titian, moving quickly in the direction of her room.

As she stood upon its threshold, and saw its unfamiliar familiarity, she had the feeling of one who is looking for the first time with waking eyes at a place seen hitherto in dreams.

This room, with its soft strange colours, its burnt-rose and pale yellow, its rich brown carvings, had this really been the setting of so many hours of unhappiness, of lonely wonderings, of restless rebellions against Fate?

It seemed to belong to a past that was remote yet ever present.

With a little sigh she moved towards the mantelpiece and took up the letters.

"Two for me and one for you, Miss Em," she said. "Let's open them and see if they contain anything exciting."

As she spoke she thought of Toye's words, and wondered if excitement did still mean much to her. Excitement. Pleasure. The feeling of the pulse of life. She had not experienced any in full measure since she had left Venice; drifting homewards by easy stages, lingering where the fancy took her, her wanderings had been unfraught with glamour.

The very mention of departure had seemed first to shake and then to break up their pleasant party at Venice. She had only seen Cosmo Trevor once alone after that hour on the balcony—an unforgettable night, when they had gone out in a gondola to hear the singers, when the pale girl with red lips had closed her eyes and sung of love as the nightingale might, when Cosmo had taken her hand in his and held it unrebuked. That had been the night before his departure. The memory of it still gave her a little thrill.

Yes, that had meant excitement, but had it meant anything more? She did not care to probe too closely. She was content to drift for a while.

As she took her letters, she saw, with a quick pulse of pleasure, that one of them was from him. The handwriting on the other was unfamiliar.

She opened it first, keeping, like a child, "the best for the last."

It was from Lady Tempest, a few warm lines to welcome her home and to remind her of her promise to stay with them.

"We hope to see you the first week in August," she wrote. "Of course, the invitation includes Miss Gerard too. Hugh is ever so much better, I am thankful to say. He has been a different man since we came home. This is a great crow for

Toye, who was always against our going abroad, but I don't mind anything so long as he gets well again. We are looking forward so much to seeing you both."

Titian read these sentences aloud to Miss Gerard, who was sitting bolt upright in a chair with a straight carved back. Her eyes were very bright and her fixed colour had deepened. She glanced to and from her own letter in a way which showed unusual perplexity.

"It's very kind of them, I'm sure," she said at last, "but I cannot go."

"You can't go? Why, Miss Em?"

"I'm very angry," she blurted out.

"Why, dear Miss Em? What has upset you? Can I do anything to help?"

"I'm afraid you can't," said Miss Gerard, with a half rueful laugh. "That wretched Baldwin is going to have a baby."

"Baldwin! Your brother?"

"Well, his wife. They're both responsible. What does it matter? What on earth does Baldwin want to start a family for at his time of life? Why, he'll be more like the child's grandfather than its father!"

"Oh, Miss Em!"

"You may well say, 'Oh, Miss Em!'"

"Perhaps—perhaps the mother wants it very badly," suggested Titian.

"Perhaps so, indeed," sniffed Miss Gerard. "They've lost no time, I must say, with their Greek epigrams!"

Titian went over to her perturbed friend, and putting her arm round her shoulder, laid a soft cheek against hers.

"Do be nice and human about it, Miss Em. Don't think harshly of the new little soul that's coming into the world. I've always felt dreadfully sorry for unwanted babies. It seems so cruel somehow, when there are so many who—— You'll be quite proud to have a tiny niece or nephew of your own."

"No, I won't, Titian, and, what's more, you're not going to cajole me into thinking so."

"You won't need any cajoling," Titian went on with soft persistence. "You are always good to young things. I remember how good you were to me when I was little."

"Ah, that was different. You were a most engaging child. I can't believe that that—Gwendoline could have an engaging child."

"But it will be your brother's as well. It will be your own flesh and blood, Miss Em. Think of that."

"I do think of that, my dear. The more I think of it, the more it is borne in upon me what a plain man Baldwin is!"

"But it may be like you."

"That's going too far. Be off with you," said Miss Em, giving Titian's cheek a resounding kiss. "I have no delusions about my appearance, I assure you. Nor Baldwin's either."

"But what has this to do with your refusing the Tempests' invitation?" asked Titian, going back to the couch on which Bibi lay spread flat as a muff, while Rufus, who had followed her, sat on the floor again at her feet, beating the ground with feathery tail.

"I thought I had explained. That—cre ture is puny and delicate and evidently is unable to look after the house properly. Could she ever do it, I wonder? She's not even capable of having a baby without whining and pining about it! Reading between the lines of Baldwin's letter I can see the state of filth and discomfort everything is in. He wants to know if I will go and stay with them for a while to help to look after things until—Gwendoline—is stronger.

Every mention of her sister-in-law's name was accentuated by a sniff.

Titian's face fell. She did not want to lose her companion now.

"How long do you think that will be, Miss Em?" she asked, rather ruefully.

Miss Gerard took up the letter and referred to its opening passage:

"You will no doubt be much interested to hear that my dear Gwendoline hopes to become a mother in September."

"In September. That's two months off, and they weren't married till the end of October!" she said. "I suppose I'll have to go. I"— she looked away towards the window—"I don't like to think of Baldwin in dirt and discomfort. He never was used to it."

"Perhaps things aren't as bad as you think."

"They're probably much worse," said Miss Gerard, pessimistically. "And I had trained Annie so nicely." Then she turned to Titian again, with a melancholy cheerfulness. "After all, I needn't leave until you go to the Tempests."

"Oh, no, please don't, Miss Em, if you can possibly manage it," Titian pleaded.

Miss Gerard rose and put a bony hand on her shoulder.

"It would be a hard thing that I couldn't man-

age to do to please you," she said, her face working a little. "I'm very fond of you, child."

Then she hurried from the room as if ashamed of her emotional outburst.

When she had gone, Titian took up Cosmo's letter and opened it with a little smile on her lips.

It, too, was meant as a welcome home, and said in scented phrases how much he had missed her gracious companionship, how much he looked forward to renewing it when she came to Craven, how there had been no moon in his sky since he left Venice, how on that last night there he had scarcely envied Endymion.

Prettily passionate, tenderly sentimental, it roused within her the same sense of excitement that his presence always evoked.

"It's very delightful, but how much of it is only words, I wonder?" she said to herself, laughing softly as she put the letter away.

Upstairs there was a sense of chill loneliness. It was strange not to feel Arnot's personality pervading the place, as it had always done, despite his seclusion. A silence lay tangibly about the corridors. The soft carpets stole the sound of her footsteps, yet instinctively she walked on tiptoe as one who fears to awaken a sleeper.

There was a certain relief in not encountering the dark form and pale eyes of Hammond, a sense as of greater freedom now that his alien presence was removed. She shivered a little when she came across the foils in a cupboard. She was glad that she need never fence with Hammond again.

At last she forced herself to enter Arnot's rooms.

They were bare, chill, neat, and bore the aspect of callous tidiness, of almost menacing emptiness, that rooms are wont to assume when one who has occupied them for long has gone from them for ever.

She sat down by the couch, whose silken coverlet was now folded in a flat square. There, where she had spent fugitive moments of happiness, of rage, of despair, a flood of understanding swept over her and washed away those bygone bitternesses.

For the first time, she understood something of what Arnot had endured. For the first time, she realised the force of his piteous rebellion. How could she, who knew nothing of the joy of life, grasp what the loss of it had meant to Arnot? Arnot, who had snatched with wilful zest at every passing pleasure, as she herself had wished to snatch of late. What must it have meant to him to lie here, day after day, year after year, crippled and tortured with memories that made his impotence a living hell?

As she sat there, she blamed her own pitiless ignorance. If she had only known, if she had only understood better, she might have been able to help him more. At any rate, she might have been more patient with him, she thought, forgetting her long hours of submission to his caprices.

How could she know what Arnot had lost in that fatal accident? By the exquisite perfection of his surroundings, by his passionate admiration of her own beauty, she realised something of what the externals of life had meant to him. The inner deeps had never been laid bare to her. Arnot's beliefs, if he had any, had always been carefully locked away.

To-day, in the light of her new knowledge, many things became clear. Perhaps those little pattering ghosts had haunted Arnot as well as herself. She had never thought of that. She suddenly remembered the kitten episode. Fenton had been quite right. She had not understood. She did not really understand yet, but she did not know that. She only regretted, as so many women have regretted before her, the lost opportunities of understanding, the vanished moments of the might-have-been which Time had shaken from her grasp like petals scattered by the wind.

## CHAPTER II

### TWO IN A GARDEN

TWO mornings later, Titian put on a shady hat and a pair of white gauntlet gloves and went out into the garden to cut roses.

There was a fountain with a broad-ledged stone basin in one corner. A clump of feathery bamboos beside it sprang lightly towards the blue of the sky and cast flickering shadows upon the ledge.

Here Titian sat when she had filled her basket, and here Fenton found her when he came in search of her through the perfumed ways of the garden. She thought, as she lifted her head to see him coming along the path, that he looked younger and more alert than usual. There was a new light in his eyes.

She sprang up to greet him, a pale pink bud in one hand.

"Welcome home," he said smiling. "I was sorry not to be here to greet you on your arrival."

"I missed you, Fenty," she answered frankly.

"Did you really?" he asked, slipping the rosebud from her fingers and putting it in his buttonhole.

She laughed. "It makes you look quite festive."

"This is a festival," he said simply. "You've come home again."

"Home," she echoed, "it sounds rather nice, to come home."

"Coming home," said Fenton, stressing the noun, "is the very nicest thing in the world."

Titian looked quickly at him. A warm colour answered him.

A home-loving man who had no real home, whose chances of simple happiness had been wrecked when he was a boy. Here was tragedy in the garden sunshine.

Yet Fenton was no tragic figure. He sat on the broad ledge beside her talking of ordinary things in an ordinary way, taking up her roses and inhaling their velvety fragrance with pleasure, asking all sorts of trivial questions about her travels and her journey. He positively refused to be fitted with a halo of romance. No dark cloak of gloom enwrapped his tweed-clad figure. He was just Fenty, dear and reliable as ever.

He did not touch upon his own affairs, nor could she ask or sympathise until he did. He spoke of hers instead.

"Now that I have come home," Titian said, "I want you to teach me all sorts of things."

"About what?"

"About my property and the management of it. I am beginning to think, Fenty, as you ordered me," she put in with a smile. "I want to know all about my responsibilities, and to undertake them as far as I can."

Fenton bent to sniff at the rose in his buttonhole.

"I have secured an excellent fellow as agent for you, an old University man named Trant. He lost his own property through no fault of his own. Then he tried farming in Canada, but couldn't stand the rigours of the winter there, so came home again looking for a job. You'll find him thoroughly reliable, Titian. You may take my word for that."

"I'd take your word for anything, Fenty," she answered.

"Thanks." Fenton moved abruptly.

"When will you begin my lessons?"

"What lessons?"

"Lessons on the art of managing my property," she replied gaily.

"Oh, Trant will teach you all that."

She glanced quickly at him. "Don't you want to teach me, Fenty?"

"Trant will teach you as well, if not better than I should. Don't turn his head, that's all."

"Turn his head?" She drew up her own proudly. "I don't do that sort of thing."

"Oh, don't you? What about young Trevor?"

Her voice chilled. "I'm not aware of having turned Mr. Trevor's head."

"Then you have less perception than I gave you credit for. His infatuation in Venice was patent to anyone who had eyes to see," Fenton said with a hard little laugh. "But then, Master Cosmo's affairs are always made very perceptible."

Master Cosmo's affairs! His infatuation! A swift wave of anger flooded Titian. Really, Fenty was going too far.

"I shall feel very grateful if you will let my private affairs alone. I don't interfere with yours." There was an edge on her voice that cut her hearer.

He looked at her keenly. "Your private affairs? Why, child, you're not serious? I——"

"I do wish you'd let me alone, Fenty," she burst out impulsively. "First you refuse to do

the one thing I ask you, and then you worry me and make me say things I don't mean——"

"You don't mean them?" he interrupted.

"You know I don't."

He softened suddenly. "And you know that nothing would induce me to interfere with your private affairs, Titian. Unless you call my clumsy chaff on the subject of your little flirtation with young Trevor interference."

Her wrath flamed up again. "It's not a little flirtation. What an odious vulgar word!"

"What is it, then?" The amusement in his lazy eyes flicked her.

"It's a—a friendship."

"Oh, I see." Then he leaned across and caught her wrist. "Does it mean anything to you—really?" he asked.

She met his gaze with a little look of defiance.

"Yes, it does, a good deal," she answered.

He dropped her wrist and turned away.

"Thanks for being frank."

She moved uncomfortably, half regretting her admission.

"Apropos of frankness," she said, after a little sharp-edged pause, during which Fenton whistled a soundless tune, "Mrs. Brooke tells me that I am getting credit which I don't deserve."

"In what way?" asked Fenton without looking at her.

"I am being praised for your improvements in the village."

"They are being done by your permission, with your money. The late agent, Butcher, neglected the property shockingly." He looked at his watch. "By the way, I asked Trant to meet me here at twelve. I want to introduce him to you."

Titian looked up. The haze which had veiled the summer blueness of the sky had thickened into clouds which now hid the sun. She shivered slightly.

"How dark it has got," she said. "I think the sunshine of Italy has spoiled me for these fainter gleams. The very air here seems damp."

"That's from the sea, of course," said Fenton. His lips closed firmly. The light had died out of his eyes.

"Yes," answered Titian. She did not want to quarrel with Fenton. He was her one real friend.

She held out a sudden olive-branch.

"Fenty," she said in her most coaxing tones.

"Yes." At the cooing inflection, Fenton steeled himself.

"I don't want Mr. Trant to teach me things. I want you." Her lips were parted; her eyes melted beseechingly at him.

Fenton paled. "I—I'm afraid I can't."

"You mean you won't," she flashed at him.

"Yes. If you like."

"Fenton, I can't understand you."

"No," he said, as once before, "and I'm afraid I can't enlighten you."

"Why—" she began.

"Don't," he said at the same moment.

Down the path, like a messenger of Fate, came a servant to say that Mr. Trant was in the library.

"Tell him we are coming," said Titian rising.

Fenton caught his breath.

"We! My God!" he said to himself. Then he took the rose from his buttonhole and threw it into the basin of the fountain.

Titian stopped, feeling hurt in some inexplicable way.

"Fenton, why did you do that?"

"The festival is over," he said drily.

She turned away without answer. Tears rushed to her eyes. She blinked them hastily away. He should not see that he had hurt her. They left the garden in silence.

When Fenton and Mr. Trant had gone, Titian went to her desk and took out Cosmo Trevor's letter. Propping her chin on her hand, she read it through once more.

It soothed her wounded pride and charmed her as his presence had always done. Here was one who never found fault with her, who was touchingly grateful for her slightest favour.

With a quick blush, she recalled the legend of Endymion and Diana. He was audacious, her minstrel. She must not let him grow too bold. She must show him that his friendship with her was not to be numbered among his "little affairs."

How prosaic Fenton was! How she hated his way of forcing one to assertions! It was almost as cruel to pin down half-realised thoughts as butterflies! Certainly they lost as much bloom in the process.

She drew a sheet of paper towards her and began to write to Cosmo Trevor, but in a moment she stopped. She did not know this new Fenton. He was a much more disturbing person than the Fenton of former days. She remembered how she had compared him to a tree. Well, the tree did not seem inclined to shelter her any longer.

She wondered why, and with the wonder came back the sense of hurt that she had felt when he threw the rose into the fountain.

A tear splashed down upon Cosmo's letter.

## CHAPTER III

### TOYE ON KISSES

"KISSING," Toye Tempest announced, "is a mere convention."

She lay in a hammock which was slung from a cedar tree on the lawn at Craven.

Tea was being prepared under another cedar whose branches touched the branches of Toye's resting-place. The twin cedars were the pride of Sir Hugh's heart.

Cosmo Trevor leaned against the trunk and looked at her. The cheery clink of cups and the stir beneath the other tree seemed to accentuate their pleasant sense of isolation.

The day was sultry and the shade of the cedar was grateful. Toye waved a walnut-branch to keep away the midges. Its spicy odour was wafted on the warm air towards Cosmo.

"If you give me one of your superfluous cushions," he said, "I will compose myself in comfort to listen to your dissertation on the subject."

"Here, then," cried Toye, pulling out a cushion from behind her and throwing it at him. "Give me a cigarette before you sit down, and then place yourself where I can see you. You're a thing of beauty, to-day, Cosmo, with your heliotrope socks and tie! I've completed the picture with that purple cushion."

Cosmo sat on the ground and looked at her. There was never any fear of boredom in Toye's company. She was wilful, provocative, sometimes even maddening, but she was never dull.

"You must possess your soul in patience for at least another half-hour, my poor young friend," she continued. "Her train is not due until four, and fat Rollo takes from twenty minutes to half an hour to amble here from the station. Have you kissed her yet, Cossie?"

Cosmo looked at her.

Toye laughed and waved her cigarette. "As I remarked before, kissing is a mere matter of convention. Some women do it and some—don't. To some, it means as little as drinking a cup of tea, a pleasant and harmless stimulant. To some, it is a sort of all or nothing."

"Pray continue. This is highly instructive."

"The verb to kiss is as encyclopædic in its meaning as the verb to love. The one poor word

has to do duty for ever so many sensations. It's like the one good black dress of the poor relation which has to serve for both day and evening wear, with little alterations."

"Expound, please," said Cosmo.

"There's the daily family kiss, for instance, as stodgy and uninteresting as a currant bun. Then there's the forced relationy kiss. That's like—like cabbage in aspic!"

"But one doesn't put cabbage in aspic."

"That's my point. It's a callous travesty of something good. Then there are other kisses, the meringues of flirtation without any cream inside! And then—there's the real thing. So much for kisses. As for the kissees, as I said before, they resolve themselves into two classes, those who allow it and those who don't."

"To what category do you belong?"

"Which do you think?"

"Upon my word I don't know. You're an enigma to me, Toye."

"How unwise of you to admit it! I shall be vainer than ever. But it's really all right, Cossie. She's very simple and easily taken in. She will never see through you as I do."

"Toye, I do wish you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

"Chaff so about Mrs. Fleury."

"Why, Cossie? Does it hurt?"

"N—no, but it jars."

A silence fell, during which Toye took up her walnut fan, and waved it to and fro. Cosmo lit another cigarette. Presently he turned to her again.

"Do you think that Fenton cares for her?" he asked.

Toye tried to read his face in a swift scrutiny before she answered. She did not want to stimulate his interest in Titian by the mention of a possible rival.

"How should I know?" she returned carelessly. "Men generally admire that large soft type of woman."

"But I mean more than admiration."

"You'd better ask him, Cossie. Fenty is so communicative that I'm sure he will be only too delighted to give you all possible information on the subject." Her laughter tinkled gaily.

Cosmo moved impatiently. She waved the walnut-branch at him in aromatic wafts.

"What is it that makes a kiss mean anything?" she said at last, looking down at the branch.

"Does it mean anything beyond a passing pleasure?"

"Don't you know?" Her voice vibrated, and there was a queer glint in her half-closed eyes.

"No, I don't," he answered. Something in the question stirred him.

He sprang up and went over to the hammock, putting a hand on either side, and looking down at her.

"I see that," she murmured.

"By gad, I believe you could teach me!"

"By gad, I believe I could," she said, glancing up at him through those greenish slits.

"Will you, Toye?" He bent towards her. His voice was eager.

She turned her head aside. "I'm not giving any lessons just at present, thank you."

Cosmo stooped lower. "Aren't you? Perhaps I'll take them."

"No, you won't, Cosmo!" she cried sharply.

His eyes held hers for an instant. Then he raised himself reluctantly, without losing hold of the hammock. Never had he known Toye to be so provocative. Never had he felt so strongly the allure of the impudent freckled face so near his own. It was as if he saw her to-day with new eyes.

Toye read his altered look and laughed up at him softly.

"Oh, Cosmo, don't be silly!" she cried. "I'm not one of your sentimental divinities who expects to be made love to on all occasions. Do go and sit down on your pretty purple cushion!"

"Damn!" said Cosmo Trevor.

"Which? The cushion or me?" she asked, swinging her feet over the edge of the hammock, suddenly alert.

He looked at her. Fire and anger mingled in his glance. Then he gave a half-rueful laugh.

"You are a little devil," he said slowly.

"Yes. Aren't I?" she retorted, using the hammock as a swing.

A sound of wheels drew their relaxed attention.

"Here's your Sleeping Beauty, Cosmo," said Toye. "Let's go and meet her."

Titian had seen them from the moment that the carriage had rounded the curve of the avenue, and now watched them with a little pang at her heart as they came across the grass—two alert young figures, careless, happy, and together.

Lady Tempest, who with old-fashioned hospitality had met her guest at the railway station, turned towards her.

"I see that tea is ready under the cedar," she said. "There are Toye and Cosmo coming towards us. Shall we go to meet them or would

you rather rest and have tea sent to your room?"

"Oh, no, thank you," Titian answered hastily. "I am not a bit tired. I would much rather be out. I have been so much indoors all my life that it seems to me to be a pity to waste a fine moment in a house."

"You are looking even better than you did at Venice, dear."

"Am I? I suppose it's because I am happy."

"Happiness is the best beauty specialist," said Lady Tempest. "I should like to think that you were happy while you were with us."

"I'm sure I shall be." Titian's pang was forgotten in the pressure of Cosmo's hand, the warm look from beneath his thick lashes.

"And so poor Dad's *inamorata* could not come!" said Toye in her clear voice. "I'm sorry for his sake that she is too much occupied at present in becoming an aunt! For my own too, because it affords me such innocent amusement to shock her. I wish her relations had chosen a more convenient season to have babies!"

"My dear Toye!" her mother murmured in remonstrance, with a glance towards Cosmo.

"My dear mother!" mimicked Toye, her tones chilled to a hard brightness. "I have never been

able to understand why it should be considered indecent to refer to one of the principal events of nature, when you would discuss without a blush the fact of your neighbour's wife having eloped with her chauffeur!"

"There are many points on which we all require enlightenment, I daresay," said Lady Tempest, hastening towards the shade of the cedar-tree. "I am only surprised to find that there is any question which modern girlhood does not profess to understand!"

"One to you, mummy," said Toye, with her little chuckle. "And as for modern girlhood, I am a woman now. Twenty-one. Of full age, and quite responsible for my own actions."

"You have now reached the years of indiscretion," put in Cosmo. "And you seem likely to make full use of them. Take this chair, Mrs. Fleury. I know them all and this is quite the best."

"Thank you," said Titian softly.

"How is Fenty, Mrs. Fleury?" asked Toye, flinging herself down on the grass.

"Very well, indeed. How beautiful it is here," she said, turning to Lady Tempest. "It seems so quiet after Camus. One hears the sea-voice always there."

"And beauty born of murmuring sound shall pass into her face," murmured Cosmo, in a tone that was intended for her alone, as he brought her tea.

Low as the murmur was, Toye's lynx ears caught it. She pinched his heliotrope ankle as he passed her.

"Why do you never say those lovely poetical things to me, Cossie?" she whispered.

There were real tears in her eyes, but Cosmo was not so easily taken in as Fenton had been. He knew Toye's gift of old. He, like Fenton, had bought his experience.

"The only beautiful thing in nature of which you remind me, Toye, is a stinging-nettle," he answered.

"How funny!" she cried. "Great wits jump. Fenty called me a nettle, too, that evening at Palazzo Marin when he put me on the mantelpiece. Do you remember, Mrs. Fleury?"

"I remember very well, indeed." Titian's eyes met Cosmo's, and they smiled.

He brought a chair to her side.

Toye bit her lip and was silent for a moment. Then she said carelessly: "You must really let me teach you to dance, Mrs. Fleury. You will be here for my belated coming-of-age ball. You must learn before then!"

"A ball!" Titian looked from one to the other with delighted surprise. "Do you know that I was never at a ball in my life?"

"It's time we remedied that," said Cosmo. "You shall have your first dancing lesson this evening, if Lady Tempest will invite me to dinner."

Lady Tempest laughed. "You know you're always welcome, my dear boy."

"I wanted to have a costume ball of some sort, but they were all too lazy to dress up," Toye continued. "Cosmo said that nothing would induce him to make a greater fool of himself than nature had done already, or words to that effect, and Fenty absolutely refused to come if it meant fancy dress. It's too bad. I wanted to go as a candle. A burning and a shining light."

"What dark places you would be able to illuminate!" said Cosmo.

"Is Fenty coming?" asked Titian quickly.

Toye cast a side-glance at her.

"I could not come of age properly if Fenty were not there to see me sloughing childish things."

"Ah, there are Hugh and the boys. I must ask Saunders to bring fresh tea."

Lady Tempest rose.

"Let me go," said Cosmo, rising too.

For a moment, Toye and Titian were left

alone together, as the other two went across the lawn.

Toye plucked a blade of grass and nibbled it reflectively. Then she glanced up again at Titian.

"I suppose you've heard that that wretched Adela is dead," she said.

"Who is Adela?"

"Fenton's wife."

"Oh."

"She died about a week ago. A happy release if ever there was one."

Titian looked at the girl. "I wonder why you are so anxious to tell me of Fenton's private affairs."

"I thought you and he were such pals," she answered, a little uncomfortably. "This grass is delicious. Have you ever tried it, Mrs. Fleury? It's got a really green taste."

"I don't think I should care for things with a green taste," said Titian, smiling. "It sounds too Futurist for me. After all, one lives in to-day. What's the use of snatching at the things of to-morrow?"

She was never long in Toye's presence without feeling as if the girl had touched some bright thing and tarnished it. Why should not Fenton keep

his troubles to himself if he wished? There was no reason why he should tell her about them. All the same, deep down in her heart lurked a little sore feeling of resentment at his withheld confidence; but she was determined not to let Toye know that.

"How well your father is looking," she said, rising to meet him. "Ah, Sir Hugh, I needn't ask how you are."

"All the better for seeing you at Craven, my dear young lady," he answered, smiling at her. "Have you noticed my twin cedars? They, too, are proud to welcome you. I assure you that we are not going to lose sight of you in a hurry. My sons, come and be introduced to the new cousin whom we discovered in Venice."

Titian felt her sense of happy well-being return at the cordiality of Sir Hugh's greeting. It was pleasant to hear the sound of his deep welcoming voice. He looked less frail too than amid the shadows of the huge *sala* at Palazzo Marin. Here, on his lawn, playing the host, and displaying the beauties of his immemorial cedars, he was in the picture as he had not been there, and Titian's impulsive heart warmed towards him anew.

## CHAPTER IV

### MIDGES IN AMBER

IT seemed to Titian as if she had really recaptured her lost youth in the time that followed.

She moved in an atmosphere of light-hearted gaiety, an atmosphere redolent of youth, and mirth, and the joy of life. The Tempest boys, frank and exuberant, were swift to worship at her shrine. They helped with the dancing lessons, they taught her how to play tennis and croquet, they disputed her favours with Cosmo Trevor as if he were one of their own age. They organised tournaments, picnics, fishing-parties, and swept her along on the crest of their young enthusiasms.

Titian was quick in responsive warmth. She had never before tasted the joys of such fresh companionship, and her whole nature expanded in its light. She laughed at their jokes, and was ready to ride, walk, or play with them as they desired.

Living in the centre of the family life as she did, she seldom saw Cosmo alone, but this cast no shadow on her golden days. She was floating on a full tide at present; she did not want to steer in any given direction. Sometimes Cosmo snatched an hour alone with her in the garden at Craven, whose thick yew hedge held deep recesses cut for seats.

Sometimes he read to her; sometimes he touched her hand, so lightly that it seemed but the brushing wing of a caress. She did not see the gossamer threads which Toye had woven round him; fairy filaments which yet were strong enough to hold his hand from the bolder captures of Venice. At all times, in all places, his eyes worshipped her beauty, hymning its praises to her until they were lost in the wonder of her blushes.

If she were aware of any check in their relations, it was with a pleasurable consciousness. The tide at Venice had seemed to verge perilously upon a torrent. She had no desire to be swept onward in its rush. She was content to drift; content to hold out her hands, as in her real girlhood, for the flowers of these uncounted days; content to take the blossom-gifts without question or analysis so long as the golden hours were scented with their sweetness. Sometimes she wondered if Fenton

had quite forgotten her, but hurt pride quickly thrust the thought aside.

It was a careless, happy time, fragrant with unforced pleasures.

Sometimes in the evening when they tired of dancing, Toye or Cosmo would sing. It was always to her that Cosmo seemed to sing, whether his beautiful voice throbbed in the passion of *To Anthea* or laid "the heavens' embroidered cloths" beneath her feet in worship, or lilted of the ringing of love's "bells of enchanted gold." He was always her minstrel. Hers, not Toye's, she thought, with a throb of happy pride.

Like an unawakened girl she desired nothing more for the moment. She was happy. She did not want to probe for the why or the wherefore while the uncapturable seemed to be really within her grasp.

Sometimes Toye's voice would ring across her musings with poignant sweetness, haunting snatches of song that craved and questioned and woke wistful echoes; but if ever their sadness brought tears to Titian's eyes, Toye was sure to dry them with quick self-mockery and a little trilling laugh.

Try as she would to stifle the feeling, the girl always jarred on Titian. There was something

innately antagonistic in their temperaments. They were as combatants differently armed for encounter; Titian with the broadsword of her beauty, Toye with the rapier of her wit. Neither was willing to sheath her unconscious weapon in the presence of the other, and the flash of each wove a perturbing cross-fire of lights.

This was the fly in the amber of Titian's days. Sometimes it was almost invisible; at others a mere midge; and midges, she told herself, without reckoning upon the preservative qualities of amber, were ephemeral.

Only one disturbing incident occurred to ruffle the calm, and catch Titian back into the whirlpool of the past.

On a still, cloudless morning she sat reading beneath the cedar from which Toye's hammock hung gaily. The boys had gone to play in a cricket-match; Cosmo was going to borrow his brother's car and drive her and Toye to see their prowess in the afternoon, and for the moment she was absolutely idle.

It was pleasant to sit under the cedar, to read or dream as the mood varied; therefore it was with a smothered sigh of disappointment that she saw Toye coming across the lawn presently.

"Why don't you try the hammock, Mrs.

Fleury?" she said as she came nearer. "It's awfully comfy, and I'm sure it would bear you!"

"I don't think that I shall test it, thanks," Titian answered. "This chair is quite comfortable enough for me."

"That's Cosmo's favourite," said Toye, slipping into the hammock, and tucking up her feet with a swirl of scanty skirts. "He's as lazy as a cat, and as handsome. Don't you think he's very handsome, Mrs. Fleury?"

"Yes, he is good-looking," Titian admitted. "But what do looks matter? Handsome men are generally rather impossible."

"Do you consider Cosmo impossible?"

Titian smiled. "You must admit that he is a little improbable at times."

Toye glanced up quickly. "He is rather. So am I, you know. That's why we both shock mother so much."

"Why do you take such a delight in shocking your mother?" Titian asked.

"I shock mother purely for educational purposes," Toye returned. "As long as you are capable of being shocked, you are capable of learning something. When you cease to be shockable, you cease to be teachable, and your mind begins to atrophy."

Titian smiled. "That's quite a new point of view to me."

"Don't you see its truth, though? When one ceases to be shocked, one calls one's attitude tolerance, but it really means that you've seen everything and heard everything and done everything that's worth doing, and that everything bores you now. That's decay. That's mental atrophy. I'd like to be killed by a flash of lightning before that happens to me. Don't you think that would be a glorious death, Mrs. Fleury?"

"I should like to die in the sun," Titian began, when her answer was checked by the sight of Marshall coming towards her across the grass.

Something in the alert figure, the mincing steps, the purposeful air brought a little chill of foreboding to Titian's heart.

"What is it, Marshall? Anything wrong?" she asked when the maid came nearer.

"Nothing wrong at all, madam. It is only this. Hammond is here and wishes to know if you will be kind enough to see him."

Hammond! At the mention of his name, the cloud of the past darkened once more over Titian. The chill deepened.

"What does he want?"

"I don't know, madam. He's very close, is Hammond. He only said he wanted to see you."

"Who's Hammond?" asked Toye, lazily.

"He was Arnot's man," Titian answered, turning a face towards her from which all the brightness had fled. "I suppose I'd better go and see what he wants. Where is he, Marshall?"

"In the small morning-room, madam. Her ladyship said to take him there."

With a little sigh, Titian rose and went to the house. Her footsteps lagged on the lawn. She had banished Hammond with the past and had hoped that she need never see his sallow face again. Now she was to see him in a moment and with him the pictures which she vainly trusted had been blotted out for ever.

Her stifled years at Camus rose vividly before her as she came into the man's presence. A wave of dislike for him swept over her as he bowed respectfully and placed a chair for her in his old deft fashion.

"How are you, Hammond? What can I do for you?'" she asked quietly, curbing her unreasonable prejudice.

"I am after a place in the neighbourhood, madam," he replied, with a swift glance from his

light eyes. "I should be most grateful for your kind recommendation."

"I shall be pleased to recommend you," she answered, "if you think it necessary. Did I not give you a reference when you left Camus?"

"Yes, madam, you and Mr. Mede were both most kind, but it is a personal recommendation I would ask for this time. Just a word from you, madam, to Mr. Trevor would have great weight, I am sure."

"Mr. Trevor?"

"Yes, madam. Mr. Cosmo Trevor wants a man, and I am applying for the post. I understand that he is a friend of the family here, and that a word from you would have great weight."

Titian flushed. "I will write you a letter if you like, Hammond, and answer any questions that Mr. Trevor cares to ask. More than that I cannot do."

She felt a singular distaste to the whole matter. She did not want to link Cosmo in any way with her past. He belonged to the present, to the future. She hated to think of him as connected with Arnot, however slightly. It jarred upon her. She wished Hammond in Jericho—anywhere but at Craven, in anyone's service but Cosmo Trevor's —yet she could not refuse so simple a request.

The man had been an excellent servant. He had been devoted to Arnot. She rose and went to a writing-table.

"You will say a good word for me to Mr. Trevor if he asks about me, madam?" said Hammond's silky tone almost in her ear.

She started. She had not heard him move.

"Certainly," she answered curtly. "You may go now, Hammond. I will send you the letter when it is ready."

"Thank you, madam. I am very grateful."

Even when the door closed behind him, Titian looked round again to be sure that he had really gone.

The morning's brightness had evaporated with his coming.

Chin on hand, she sat for a long time before the blank sheet of paper, seeing episode after episode in which Hammond had played the part of silent observer. Did men talk to their valets? she wondered. Arnot had talked to Hammond when she was not there. Would Hammond talk to Cosmo Trevor? Would he tell him of her humiliations? Would he tell him of her hours of submission, of her being decked and draped like an idol, of the experiments tried upon her beauty?

Would he? Would he? she wondered fiercely—— and would Cosmo Trevor listen?

Her cheeks burned hotly at the thought. What folly it had been to play at forgetting a past which still lived, which could paradoxically run on ahead of one, and lie in ambush, ready to leap out when one least expected it!

Would he listen if Hammond talked? Would men? Did men? She knew so little about them really. She knew so little about anything, if it came to that. She had not minded Fenton's knowledge. He belonged to the past. He was the one good thing in it. He understood. But would the other?

With an effort she took up a pen and began to write to Cosmo Trevor. When she had despatched the letter she felt as if she could not face him that afternoon, as if she must give up the cricket-match, even if the boys were to be disappointed.

She spent her morning between formulating excuses and telling herself what a fool she was. She did not really make up her mind what to do until Toye rapped sharply at her door and called out:

"Did anyone tell you that we're lunching early? I hope you're ready."

Then she swept into a sudden bustle of pre-

paration, and found herself on the steps almost before she knew that she had come to a decision.

A dark young man, Cosmo's brother, was driving the car.

"On second thoughts, Billy refused to trust the car to anyone but himself," Cosmo said.

"Don't you think I'm right, Mrs. Fleury?" asked Billy Trevor. "Jump in, Toye. I haven't seen you for a million years. At least, it seems so to me. Cosmo will look after Mrs. Fleury."

"Billy, you are the light of my eyes," cried Toye, getting in next him. "I'm glad that you have veiled your beauty in goggles, otherwise I should be dazzled."

"Didn't I manage that nicely?" murmured Cosmo as he arranged a cushion behind Titian and tucked a rug around her.

"Did you manage it?" she asked. Her morning's disturbance had left her paler than usual, but in Cosmo's eyes she looked distractingly lovely.

He told her so in one of his magnetic glances.

"This is a chance hour," he said caressingly. "I see so little of you when the cubs are about."

"You must not call them that. They are dear boys."

"Don't let us waste time in talking about them."

"What shall we talk about?"

There was almost the same pleasant sense of isolation as in a gondola, as the motor hummed swiftly through red-roofed village and arching wood.

"I have a favour to ask," said Cosmo softly. "But, before I ask it, I want to say that I am awfully sorry I couldn't take your man, Mrs. Fleury. I had already engaged another when he applied."

By her sudden sense of relief, Titian realised what a storm in a tea-cup she had raised.

"It doesn't matter in the least," she cried.

"I'd have taken him if I could, of course. I hate even to seem to refuse any request of yours. As it was, I passed him on to my brother-in-law, Fred Allendale, who wants a man. I hope he'll take him."

"It really doesn't matter. I only wrote because I did not like to refuse him when he asked me. It was in no sense a request of mine. Please don't think any more of it. Now, what is your favour?" She turned to him with a happy smile, her foolish fears and fancies vanishing like a wisp of mist before the sun. "I feel almost inclined to grant it without knowing what it is."

"That's very sweet and generous of you, but is

it wise?" he asked softly. "Supposing it were the half of your kingdom?"

A waft of wind blew the scented chiffon of her veil across his cheek. It was like a delicate caress, and the curve of her lashes on her creamy skin was adorable. Any man might well lose his head in her presence.

He captured the trail of chiffon and held it lightly as he continued. "It is not as bold a request as that—now. It is something about the ball."

She glanced up at that, with sparkling eyes. "The ball? Yes? Oh, you don't know how excited I am about it! It's absurd of me, I know. At my age—" she murmured tentatively.

"The goddesses have nothing to do with age. Their youth is eternal," he continued. His voice trembled a little.

She took the veil gently from his fingers.

"You are forgetting your favour."

"I forget everything when I am with you," he cried. "The favour is this. Will you wear white that night? I have only seen you in black up to this, except for this wisp of cloud." He touched her floating veil again. "Will you shine like the day-star? Will you wear white? To please me?" he added softly.

A vivid blush surged up to meet her curving lashes.

"To please you?" she echoed. "Yes. I think I would do as much as that to please you."

"I wonder if I shall be able to stand it," said Cosmo boldly. "Do you know how divinely lovely you are?"

"Please don't," she pleaded, with a feeling that was half-elation, half-pain.

## CHAPTER V

### FENTON'S VISION

LADY TEMPEST, as onlooker, saw the game from every aspect. She watched its trend with a wary eye for Fenton's interests, and as the time fixed for the ball drew nearer, she wrote him a letter of some urgence, begging of him to come and stay at Craven for at least a few days beforehand.

To which he replied that he was too busy serving Titian's interests to come before the day of the ball.

Lady Tempest answered in some agitation that he would serve his own better by an immediate arrival, to which Fenton replied by quoting with what seemed to her a more complete blindness than that which inspired the poet to write the line:

They also serve who only stand and wait.

To which, Lady Tempest: "Those who stand and wait are liable to be left standing."

To which, silence on Fenton's part.

Then his sister washed her hands of him until he arrived on the fateful day, when she put her arms round his neck and hugged him, and drew him aside into her little morning-room, where dinner was already laid for the house-party.

"Aren't dances worse than earthquakes?" she said. "Especially in quiet country-houses. Hugh is entrenched in the smoking-room, which needless to say has not been touched, as it belongs to the men. Nothing will dislodge him but dinner. He is as firmly fixed as a limpet on a rock. We are to dine here presently, and then we shall be hunted forth until the room is transformed into a card-room. Everything else is in train, I think. Toye and the boys and Cosmo have been indefatigable."

Fenton put his hands on his sister's shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. There was a light in his own and his face was quickened and eager.

"Fuss agrees with you, Mollie," he said. "A word before the pack is upon us. I stole past the drawing-room where they were putting an extra polish on the floor. How is she?"

Lady Tempest looked back at him with a question in her eyes.

"Why didn't you come when I sent for you, Fenty?"

"Am I too late?" he asked quickly.

"I—don't know. I wish I did. She is lovelier than ever. Cosmo is always in attendance, and I must admit that she seems to like it. No man could be long in her company without feeling the charm of her beauty. Hugh and the boys rave about her. She has made heaps of conquests since she came here."

Fenton drew a long breath.

"Her beauty is the least part of her to me. I—loved her best when her eyes were red from crying. It is she, she herself, her lovely nature, her courage, her sweetness." He stopped abruptly. "Does she enjoy the dangling?"

"Fenty, she loves it. She is like a child with a handful of toys. She likes them all, but doesn't know which to choose."

His face cleared. "If that's the way——"

"But, dear, I don't think that Cosmo is one of the toys."

"What is he, then?"

"I'm not sure. Her eyes, her voice, soften when she speaks to him. She has a different look for him——"

"The deuce she has!"

"I don't know," continued Lady Tempest dubiously. "I hope it isn't serious. Of course,

it would be an excellent thing for Cosmo, but——"

"It wouldn't be an excellent thing for Cosmo at all," broke in Fenton decisively. "He's not the man for her. I don't believe that a woman like Titian would find happiness with a man like Cosmo. God knows, if she would, I'd be the first to give it to her if I could. She's had little enough, poor child. The best thing the world has to give isn't good enough for her, but I can't believe that Cosmo, a soulless young philanderer, could give her the best. He's frittered himself on too many other women. He's not the man for her, Mollie, whoever is."

He paced up and down the narrow space left by the dinner-table in the little room.

"You are, Fenty," she said softly.

"As for that," he returned, with difficulty, "if—there is such a—gift for me I—hope I may be worthy of it. If not—It's the real thing, Moll. I'd—live, or die—for her happiness, whichever way would—give it to her most surely." He stopped, and awkwardly moved things on the mantelpiece. "I'll always have something. She trusts me. She turned to me when she was in trouble. That's a big thing, Mollie. She must be happy now. But I don't want her to make a mistake. One pays so much more heavily for

mistakes than for actual sins. Yet you make a mistake with your eyes shut, and you generally sin with your eyes open, so the punishment ought to be heavier. It isn't though."

He sighed, and Mary Tempest knew that he was thinking of his own great mistake. She put her hand on his arm.

"That's all over now, my dear old boy," she said lovingly. "Please God, you'll have your happiness yet. Titian was chained up for so long that she is enjoying her freedom to the full now. She's running wild a little, and who could blame her?"

"Not I."

"Will you speak to her to-night, Fenton?"

He moved his shoulders impatiently, then turned to her with a half-shy, half-wistful smile.

"Don't let's talk about it, Moll, please. I—don't want—to have the bloom rubbed off."

"My dear!" she whispered.

Then the door was flung open and what seemed an avalanche of boys and dogs whirled into the room, turning peace to babel.

"I say, Fenty!"

"Good old Fenty!"

"Nice way you sneaked in!"

"Mean old hoss not to give a shout!"

"'Spose you're a nailer at the tango by this."

"Two nailers," returned Fenton, emerging from the pats and thumps and punches to greet Toye as she entered.

"Hallo, Toye. Not dressed yet? Have you learned to respect your uncle's grey hairs?" he asked, kissing the little cool cheek she turned up to him.

"I'll respect you, Fenty, when you become really respectable, which I sincerely hope will be never!" Toye answered. "We have had a day of it. Why didn't you come earlier, you wretch, and help us to bear its burden and heat? You reap the benefit of our labours now."

"You forget, my child, that I am a man of affairs."

"Not of as many affairs as most men," she retorted quickly.

"Are you speaking practically, or sentimentally, may I ask?"

"Sentimentally, of course," she answered, with a grimace. "I am a confirmed sentimentalist, as you know. Aren't I?"

"I never met anyone who could talk more tosh to the minute than you, Toye," put in her brother Hugh. "Why aren't you titivating yourself and

hiding the burning light of your hair under a bushel of ospreys or something?"

"I thought you admired red hair," Toye retorted. "I've heard you rave over Mrs. Fleury's."

"Hers isn't red. It's a glorious chestnut," said Hugh indignantly.

Fenton laughed. Toye brushed against him.

"Your chestnut-tree is in blossom, Fenty," she murmured. "A big lovely, rosy creamy thing."

Fenton looked at her lazily. "I was never good at riddles, Toye. What's the answer?"

"Oh, I don't know the answer," she said. "You'll have to find that out for yourself."

"Children all, it's time to go and dress," said Lady Tempest. "You can continue your squabbles at dinner if you like. I must try to dislodge your father from the smoking-room or he will never be ready in time. I made Titian go and rest," she continued, turning to Fenton. "She is as excited as a young girl over her first ball."

"What else is she but young, I'd like to know?" growled Hugh. "Isn't she a ripper, Fenty? And she's taken to dancing like a bird."

"How very odd!" Fenton remarked with a twinkle. "Now, the only place where I've ever seen birds dance was in South America."

"Go to, thou literal old hoss!" cried Hugh with another thump. "Let's come and make ourselves look dazzling, Fenty, and I'll cheer you up with a cigarette that's something like, I can tell you."

"Something like what?" asked Fenton innocently. "Hay?"

For which he was rewarded with another punch between the shoulders as his nephews convoyed him upstairs between them.

Toye looked after the three retreating backs. Her gaze lingered upon Fenton's.

"I wonder?" she said to herself. "I wonder? Some women are fools, but all men!"

There were greenish sparks in her eyes as she ran lightly up the stairs.

When Titian saw her ball-dress, disappointment surged uppermost in her mind despite its beauty. Owing to the lateness of her decision to wear white, the dress had not arrived until the very day of the ball, and she saw it for the first time when she went to her room to rest.

There it lay upon the bed, cleverly spread by Marshall for her admiration.

It was what Madame Fadette, its creator, called an inspiration, in its artistic mingling of ivory lace, chiffon, and gold tissue. A pair of gold shoes came

with it, and a fillet of golden roses. There was also a golden rose to clasp the laces at her bosom.

Marshall hung over it in ecstasy, touching the filmy folds with reverent fingers. Titian could almost fancy that she purred with delight. At last she looked up, struck by her lady's silence.

"Aren't you pleased, madam?" she asked.

"Y-es," answered Titian slowly. "It's very pretty, but——"

"Pretty is not the word," returned Marshall with decision. "It's ravishing, madam. That's what it is. What is it that doesn't please you?"

"I thought it would have been all white," said Titian.

"All white would have been insipid. It would not have suited your style at all. I wrote to Madame Fadette as you ordered, madam, and asked her to create a white ball-dress for you. This is the result. It is her own idea entirely. She has made for you for so many years that she knows exactly what suits you."

Marshall was right, Titian thought, as she tried to rest, her brain in a whirl of excitement. What had she, a woman of thirty, to do with the snowy vestures of a debutante? Her day for that was past, and she had never had it.

Yet in some ways she was as fresh and unspoilt

as the youngest girl who would be at the ball to-night, as innocently eager in her desires, as simply expectant of its pleasures. There was something more in the contrast of her thwarted youth and the ripeness of her years than that piquancy which so pleasantly titillated Cosmo Trevor; there was a pathos as well, if only he had eyes to see it.

There was no thought of sadness or self-pity in the radiant vision which looked at Titian from the long glass later.

Madame Fadette had proved herself in the right. The clinging gown with its clever touches of golden tissue suited her rich beauty as no simpler white would have done. Round her throat she wore a quaint gold necklace of Indian workmanship from which depended a golden bird with outspread wings. It rose and fell on the white curve of her breast with every happy breath.

Even Marshall was silent before such glowing triumphant beauty. Titian seemed to radiate joy, as if she were illumined from within.

"You think I shall do, Marshall?" she asked, turning from the glass at last.

"Do, madam?" breathed the ecstatic Marshall. "All I wish is—that poor Mr. Fleury could see you," had been on the tip of her tongue, but she

neatly nipped it off and turned the name to Miss Gerard's.

"I'm sorry she is not here," said Titian, but her thoughts did not linger with her absent friend. She was too closely enwrapped in the enchanting atmosphere of the present.

Fenton dressed early and waited in the hall on the chance of an unwitnessed greeting. His eyes never left the broad staircase; his heart leaped at the sound of every footfall. Each hurrying maid, each busy, darting man left disappointment in their wake. Then he began to pace up and down the hall, fearing the momentary advent of the boys, and with them a vista of lost chances.

As he strode a soft sound made him turn sharply. Titian was coming down.

On the instant, the old oak stairs became a ladder from heaven, and the starry host concentrated in the person of one beloved woman. He held his breath and turned a little paler at the sight of the shining vision crowned with golden roses. Slowly, slowly she came down. It was as if she were deliberately stepping from her heights to come to him, or so it pleased him to fancy.

O, world with stars enwrought! O, sun and moon of wonders, was he to be made most blest

and happy of all unworthy men? He would fain have knelt on the lowest stair until she came near enough for him to kiss her beautiful feet, to touch the hem of her garment.

As it was, he stood still, gazing at her with his whole soul in his eyes.

She did not see him until she was more than half-way down the stairs, lingering a little with unusual self-consciousness, her eyes shining, her lips parted dreamily.

When she caught sight of him, she quickened her pace, and descended the rest of the stairs in a little run, holding out both hands.

He took them in his. Words failed him for the moment, but his eyes spoke.

"It's very good to see you, Fenty. I am so glad you were able to come."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am. Do you—do you think I look nice, Fenty?"

Nice—what a bald, meagre, inadequate word! Oh, if he had but the gift of tongues! If he were but a Chrysostom that he could lay golden phrases at her golden feet. All he could muster was a husky:

"Very." Oh, beautiful, beautiful, thrice beautiful! Thy dumb servant hath no words for thy

worship. He can but lay his heart within thy hands, and fall on his knees before thee!

"Really, Fenty?" She looked up at him with a half-shy coquetry that was new to him.

"Really, Titian."

"When did you come?" she asked.

"About an hour ago." He was beginning to feel the earth beneath his feet again. For a time he had been whirled dizzily through space.

"Then it was you whom I heard Hugh apostrophising as 'old hoss' just outside my door?"

"That's his favourite term of endearment for me."

"I think you've forgotten that you're holding my hands all this time, Fenty," she said with a little laugh.

His clasp tightened. "No, I haven't. Not a bit of it. How many dances am I to have?"

She looked surprised. "Do you dance, Fenty?"

"I am better at sitting out," he confessed, "but you'll have so many dancing partners that you'll probably be glad of a rest."

It was good to see him again, good to feel that without effort they had slipped back once more to their old terms.

"How many do you want?" she asked.

"Every one."

She laughed outright at his extravagance.

"You mustn't be greedy," she said. "I am engaged about three deep already."

"You're not?"

"I am indeed. You've no idea of how popular I am, Fenty."

"Not the faintest," he said, still holding her hands and smiling at her. "Give me two running, at any rate."

She hesitated. "If I can."

"Not if. You must."

"Fenty, I don't know you to-night," she said, raising her eyebrows.

The light fell full on the golden flowers in her ruddy hair, on the golden bird that rose and fell on her breast.

"No, you don't," said Fenton, dropping her hands, and turning away his eyes.

## CHAPTER VI

### ON THE CREST

TITIAN rode on the crest of a wave of happy excitement. Ardent eyes burned incense before her; eager tongues poured forth oblations.

Lady Tempest was besieged for futile introductions to her. She smiled and regretted, but her programme was full to overflowing. The letter C with an arrogant little curl at its top figured frequently on her programme. It followed hot upon the heels of the two spaces across which "Fenty" was scrawled in a rather shaky hand.

The lights, the music, the dancing, the incense, intoxicated her to a pitch of gay coquetry which she had never known before.

Cosmo's touch, his nearness, the fire in his eyes, thrilled her to an unconsciousness of danger-signals.

She felt supreme, ineffable, as if nothing could ever go wrong in this beautiful world again.

At last Fenton's turn came. He waited for her

in the hall. She had seen him there for several dances past, waiting, looking at her each time as she swept by him on a partner's arm. Now he came forward with that new air of determination.

"Our dance, I think," he said.

She smiled gaily at him.

"Our dances," she answered, giving his arm a little squeeze. She felt him tremble as she touched him. "A goose walking over your grave, Fenty?" she asked lightly. "You really should have learned the tango. Did you see how nicely I danced it?"

"No."

"Didn't you look on at the dancing at all?"

"No."

She looked up at him quickly. Had he grown incomprehensible again?

"Where are you taking me to, Fenty?" she asked.

They were going down a corridor which led to a side door into the gardens.

"I am taking you to the garden, to the yew hedge," he answered. "It is cool and quiet there."

The glass door at the end of the corridor was open. As they neared it, a couple came hurrying in from the blue darkness without.

They were Toye and Cosmo, and they laughed as they came towards them.

Toye wore a daring little frock with a tunic of tulle almost the colour of her hair. The string of pearls round her neck was no whiter than her skin.

"Don't go too far away, Mrs. Fleury," said Cosmo. "Remember that the second next dance is mine."

She smiled. "I won't forget."

"Are you going to teach Fenty how to flirt?" Toye asked. "I'm afraid you'll have a hard task. He doesn't even know the rudiments. Do you, Fenty?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Fenton answered. "But if I wanted lessons in the art I'd rather go to you than to—Mrs. Fleury."

"Would you indeed?" Toye retorted, with a glance up at Titian. "I'm not at all sure that you'd be right."

"You're missing half this dance," said Fenton.

"Is that what you call a hint?" his niece laughed, slipping her arm through Cosmo's. "Come along, Cossie, we're evidently *de trop*."

The insinuation pricked Titian. What a knack Toye had of trying to put her in her place and keep her there! Her place was evidently on a plane with Fenton and Lady Tempest, and Toye seemed to push her with a light word and a laugh from the rising generation to the risen.

She checked Fenton with a touch.

"It would be better not to go so far away," she said. "Let us stay somewhere nearer so that we can hear when the dances begin."

"Are you so keen on dancing everything?"

"Yes. I am keen, as you call it. It's my first dance, you know, Fenty. You may think me absurd, but I can't help feeling excited. I want to enjoy every moment of it."

"I don't think you absurd. Where would you like to go?"

"There are plenty of nice places in the conservatory," she said, turning towards it.

"Oh, you've sampled them?"

"Some of them," she answered, with a smile.

The stars in their courses fought against Fenton as they threaded their way to a secluded nook at the far end of the conservatory.

A fountain tinkled pleasantly; quaint lanterns hung among the palms like luminous butterflies and diffused a faint radiance.

Titian was never in less mood for reality. All her impulses were for fluttering capriciously above the smiling surface of things; for tossing pleasures from hand to hand as a juggler plays with gaily-coloured balls. For her to-night, no deeps existed.

In Fenton, the very foundations of his being were

moved, and he, usually so swift to understand, failed to see that to grasp to-night's chance were to imperil its very existence.

"Do you care to know what I think of you?" he asked in a low voice, as he sat down next her.

She looked at him. There was something portentous about Fenty to-night. She really could not be serious. At another time she would be ready to respond to his mood, but not now. She must be allowed to feel young, gay, irresponsible, just for to-night.

"Not unless it's something nice," she returned quickly, opening her fan and playing with it. "I warn you, Fenty, that I am in a hopelessly frivolous mood this evening."

"Are you?"

"Would you like me to flirt with you? Or try to?" she added, remembering Toye's comment.

"No, thanks."

"It's useless to be cross with me, Fenty."

"I'm not cross with you."

"What is it, then?"

"It's—just this," he said, clasping and unclasping the hands that hung between his knees. "You want to play the fool to-night, and I—can't. Things—have happened lately that have—that have altered things."

"I know," she answered softly, touched in spite of her proclamation of frivolity by what she felt underlay his halting phrases.

"You know?" he asked, turning quickly to her.

"Only bald facts. You never told me anything about your own affairs, Fenty."

"I did not want to bother you."

"As if my only friend could ever have bothered me."

"Am I that?" he asked eagerly.

"You were for years," she returned.

"But not now?"

"Not my only friend," she answered softly. "You have your own place, Fenty dear."

"Where is it?" he whispered, taking fan and hand in his clasp.

She drew both away. "It's quite a comfortable little niche," she said, with a smile. "You mustn't be too grasping."

"But I am grasping. I can't be content with a mere niche," he said huskily.

"I'm afraid you must be."

"Who has supplanted me?"

"My dear Fenty, don't be absurd. No one has supplanted you." She melted again. "You are safe in your own warm place. No one could dislodge you from it, Fenty."

"I suppose I must be satisfied with a crumb, for to-night."

"If you call that a crumb," she answered lightly. "I am becoming so spoilt that I think it sounds rather ungrateful of you."

"Do you?"

Then after a pause:

"Yes. You're getting on quite nicely—for a novice."

"At what?"

"Flirting."

"Don't," he said, touching a fold of her gown.

Something in his tone pierced through her deliberate lightness. She glanced quickly at him and away again.

"Very well, I won't," she said. "What shall we talk about? Tell me something of your life, Fenty. You know all about mine."

"All?" Doubt rang in the query.

The swift blood raced to her cheek, but she did not lower her eyes before his.

"Well, nearly all," she admitted.

Silence fell for a moment. The fountain dripped and tinkled coolly through the stillness. Then there was a rustle of skirts and murmurs of voices as the dancers in couples invaded their dim solitude. No one came very near them. The chairs had been

placed with tact and discretion. Presently the whispers became soft as the rustle of palm-leaves.

"Well? Have you nothing to say?" said Titian at last.

Fenton turned a white face to her. "Yes. I have;—much to say. Much that is burning to be out. But you don't want to hear it."

She looked a little startled. "I don't want to be serious. Don't be serious, Fenty. Don't spoil my enjoyment."

"God forbid that I should spoil your enjoyment," he said bitterly. "You never understood me, Titian, if you could think that."

"I don't know what to think," she murmured.

"Shall I tell you? Shall I tell you what I want you to think?"

"I don't want to think at all to-night. Can't *you* understand, Fenty?"

"I understand that you are deliberately playing with me," he said.

The dancers rose, drifted away, except for a couple at the other end of the conservatory.

"No; oh, no, I'm not."

"What then?" He looked at her hands fluttering once more about the fan. In his present mood, he did not dare to touch them again. He

looked at the bent head, at the quickened rise and fall of the golden bird, and then he looked away.

"I—don't know," she faltered. "Fenty, don't be unkind."

"It is you who are unkind. You madden me. You play with me, you tempt me to speak, and then you seal my lips. You spoke the truth. I don't understand you." He looked at her with sombre unhappy eyes as if he would wrest comprehension from her.

Gone was his starry vision. It was not to him that the golden rose of womanhood was to be given. His tongue was tied. His was no fiery eloquence to sweep her from her feet to his arms. Every halting word seemed to raise an invisible barrier higher between them.

"I—I don't think I understand myself."

"You can understand this much, at least. I am a man, not a stone. You are a woman, not a child. You should know better than to play with fire."

"Fenton!"

"You are playing with it now," he went on, in a fierce undertone, clasping his hands until the knuckles showed white. "To amuse yourself, you have lit a blaze in me. You don't care what it burns so long as you see its pretty flare. Take

care. Don't come too near. Your beautiful hands may get scorched."

"Fenton!" she cried again, lifting the necklace from her throat as if it choked her.

As quickly as it had arisen, the flame died out of Fenton's face, leaving it grey with the ashes of despair.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely. "But you should have learned by this that there are limits to a man's endurance."

Hot anger suddenly swept over her.

"I have learned that there are limits to mine," she cried, rising as she saw Cosmo Trevor coming towards her between the palms. "Ah, Mr. Trevor, has our dance begun?"

The relief in her tone cut Fenton to the quick. He rose too, and stood beside her silently.

"It's just beginning," Trevor answered. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Come along, Mrs. Fleury, I don't want to lose a bar."

"Nor I," she said, turning to him eagerly.

As she moved, her fan slipped to the ground. The two men stooped for it, but it was Fenton who secured it and restored it to her. It gave her a fierce pleasure to see that his hand trembled.

"Thank you," she said in a tone that was

delicately frosted. She was glad if she had hurt him. He had tried to spoil her evening.

A tumult of feelings warred within her as she swept away on Cosmo's arm, with eyes carefully averted from the hurt look on Fenton's face. At the bottom of her heart, she knew well what had looked at her from his eyes, but she thrust the knowledge from her as she had thrust the reality.

For the first time in her life, she felt really angry with Fenton.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE GOLDEN BIRD

COSMO read disturbance in Titian's fluttering breath and heightened colour, in the forced ring of her laughter and in her high-held head.

"Has old Fenty been making love to her, I wonder?" he thought to himself, as he slipped his arm round her.

The idea tightened his clasp; he could not let himself be cut out by Fenton. This sleeping beauty was lovely enough to turn any man's head. He was an adept at smoothing ruffled feelings. He began with the lightest stroke. What wonder if the touch grew bolder at continued contact?

"I never like to talk when I am dancing, do you," he said softly, looking at the beautiful flushed face so near his own.

"You forget my inexperience," she laughed. "But I think you are right. It is wiser to enjoy one thing at a time."

"I am enjoying several," he murmured. "My pleasure is exquisitely complex, as all pleasure should be."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you there," she demurred. "I think I like simple things best."

"You can't call dancing like this simple."

"Is it the point of view or the surrounding circumstances which make pleasures simple or complex?" she asked.

"In this case the surrounding circumstances, I think," he said, with a swift glance from beneath his thick lashes.

Titian turned away her head. "I thought you didn't want to talk."

"Nor do I. I am content to drift."

"So am I."

"Let us drift, then."

Titian felt as if he had charmed her back to her former sphere of joy. Cosmo always seemed to restore to her what Fenton took away. She turned to him again with happy parted lips, a swinging lightness in every movement.

"I never thought that dancing could be like this."

"Ah, you have much to learn, most beautiful lady."

"I have," she said, with a little sigh, "and I have lost so many years."

"There are many more to come," Trevor murmured. "I would like to teach you some things. May I?"

"If you wish. But you have taught me much already."

"What have I taught you?"

A sudden shyness checked her. "Oh, I don't know. Different things. Things about life."

"To have taught one such as you anything about life should be privilege enough for any man," said Trevor in quickened tones. "Yet I am grasping."

Ah, grasping! That was what she had called Fenton a little while ago. Strange that Cosmo's ambition should call forth no repulse.

"I want to teach you a little more. May I?"

It was a sweet avarice, one easily forgiven.

"What do you want to teach me?" she whispered.

Cosmo did not quite know. He had drifted on the tide of her beauty to his own skill in phrase-making.

"Let us secure a seat before the rush comes. We'll go to a nook behind the conservatory, which I don't think anyone has discovered except myself."

It was cool and still in the open air. The high-backed white seat which was their goal was set in an angle between the garden wall and the faintly luminous wall of glass. Once or twice a light shape and the white patch of a shirt front flitted by in search of seclusion, but otherwise they were alone, in a scented solitude, silent save for the fluttering of night-moths against the lure of the glass panes behind them.

Trevor took Titian's fan and swayed it to and fro.

"The night air is delicious," he said. "It is like a caress on one's cheek. Don't you feel it so?" He moved the fan nearer to her face.

"It is very pleasant," she admitted.

"The night wind has all sorts of privileges," Cosmo continued. "But I have one advantage over him."

"What is that?"

"Do you care to know?"

The soft waves of air were like caresses on her cheek, but she could not think of them as coming only from the night wind.

"Yes, please."

"I can tell you how beautiful you are. He can't."

"Oh!" She moved a little.

"Why don't you like me to tell you that you are beautiful?" he asked, bending closer.

"I—oh, I don't know. It—it seems to matter so little, somehow."

"It matters tremendously."

"Do you really think so?" There was a wistful ring in her voice which was lost on him.

"You are so used to the fact of your beauty that you don't realise how much it matters. Haven't men told you——?"

"Oh, don't," she cried.

"Why not? Doesn't it please you to have anyone call you beautiful?"

"Not anyone." Her head was bent, her voice low and confused.

"Does it please you when I call you beautiful?" His tones were dangerously soft, and Titian's heart began to beat quickly. She put out her hand as if to stop him. He took it and kept it in his.

"Yes. No. Yes, I think it does."

"Yes, no, most beautiful lady. We'll leave it at that for the moment. You can't alter the great fact of your beauty whether one tells you of it or not." His fingers were deftly unbuttoning her glove. "I want your satin hand, not your suède glove," he whispered, as he drew it off.

Titian was silent. Words seemed to choke her. She made a faint effort to withdraw her hand, but the curious magnetism of his presence weakened her as before.

"You were kind to me in Venice," he went on in the same soft tones. "Why be cruel to me now?"

"This is not Venice."

"That is no reason. I have travelled far since the Venetian days. Haven't you?"

"Yes," she answered, very low.

"Are you happier now?"

"Yes."

"So am I," he murmured, carried away by the influences of her touch, her nearness, and the starry dusk. "It is a wonderful thing to be happy, but it is a still more wonderful thing to realise that one is happy."

As he held her hand in one of his and stroked the white curve from her wrist upwards with the other, her thoughts unwillingly sprang back to the long-ago day when Arnot had caressed her bare arms. There was something of the same quality in Cosmo's touch, something which left her inner being unresponsive. In her careless desire to drift, she had never looked to see whither she was drifting, and wonder suddenly came upon her as to whether she desired to go with this current or

not. It seemed now as if there might be a whirlpool ahead. Was she prepared to be engulfed in it, to be whirled in its wild embrace, or flung outwards—on what shore?

She sighed. Her thoughts spun in a bewildering tangle. In spite of herself, she was being forced to think to-night.

"Why do you sigh?" murmured Cosmo. "Goddesses should only smile."

"I am not a goddess."

"What are you, then?"

"Only a woman."

"And a woman who has just said that she is happy! Is that why you sigh?"

"I—suppose so."

"Not because the Golden Bird's feathers are coming out?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Don't you know the legend of the Golden Bird?" he asked. His hand slid up her arm until it met the falling laces of her sleeve.

Her voice trembled as she whispered, "No."

"I came across it the other day in a little book of prose poems. I meant to bring it to you."

Titian felt that she ought to check his caresses, but words failed her.

It seemed to her as if speech and emotion were

on two absolutely different planes. What each said appeared to bear no relation whatsoever to what they did or felt. She only knew that speech must continue. She felt safer while his voice went on.

"Tell me," she whispered. She could not speak above her breath.

"Every day on his way to school a boy passed a lonely house," said Cosmo, his eyes on the troubled loveliness of her face, half-seen in the dusk. "In an upper window was perched a beautiful golden bird. It seemed to him that its head turned to watch him as he went. He longed to see it nearer, to touch it, to have it for his own. Day by day, the longing grew, until it became an obsession. He pined. He felt that he would die unless he got the Golden Bird for his own. At last, one night, he broke into the house, climbed softly to the upper room, and stole the bird. It was very quiet. He hid it under his coat and ran away. When he got to a secret place he gently brought it forth to look at it. It was a stuffed bird, and its feathers were coming out!"

His voice trailed away into silence. His arm slipped suddenly round her. He touched the pendant on her breast.

"Here is a better emblem of our golden bird,"

he whispered. The soft contact went to his head. He pressed her closely to him with sudden passion; kissed her as Arnot had kissed her in those bitter, unforgotten days.

"My God, how lovely you are!"

It might have been an echo!

Yet, for a moment, his passion swayed and held her, swung her into the grip of an emotion which left her trembling, but only for a moment.

She put out hands of protest.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!"

He drew away, still holding her.

"Let me go, please," she said.

He released her, sobering suddenly.

"Please go—leave me to myself for a little——"

"I hardly——"

"If you care at all for me you will do as I ask."

"Of course I care."

"Then please go."

"But you——"

"I shall be all right here. No one will disturb me. Please do as I ask you."

"Won't you let me take you back to the house?"

"No. I shall go back myself in a few minutes."

He turned to go, but came back quickly and bent over her.

"You'll forgive me, won't you?"

To his surprise and shame she began to cry softly.

"Don't. You mustn't. I'm going," he said, with swift alarm.

He turned and went without another word, and Titian, with beating heart, began to dry her tears.

Cosmo Trevor's violence had unnerved her, coming so suddenly upon the heels of his dallying minstrelsy. She wanted to be alone to regain her self-control before she had to face people again. She felt as if each touch of his lips must have left a burning imprint. She was a woman now, not the girl whom Arnot's kisses had seared. She must search her soul to see what this thing really meant.

Couples passed backwards and forwards. The solitude had suddenly become populous. Where could she go in search of her former happy poise? Suddenly Fenton's words flashed across her mind.

"I am taking you to the yew hedge. It is cool and quiet there."

Cool and quiet. That was just what she wanted. She would slip away there now, although she would not go with Fenton when he had asked her.

Poor Fenton! She had been cruel to him. What a contrast——!

She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks as she went hurriedly to the shelter of the great yew

hedge. Spaces for seats had been cut in its depth at intervals. Some of these bore glimmering forms as she hastened by. The last two were empty, and she chose the nearer, sinking back into it with a sigh of relief.

Here she could be quiet. Here she could think, when the bewildering whirl in her brain would permit thought. Here she could rest until the peaceful solace of the night laid cooling hands upon her perturbed spirit, and armed her with self-confidence enough to face the world again.

What was it that he had said?

"We have travelled far since the Venetian days!"

How far had she not travelled since she had looked at the glowing vision of herself in the glass only a few short hours ago? How far had she not travelled even since she sat with Fenton in the conservatory? On what road were her feet set?

She hid her hot face in her hands again.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE YEW HEDGE

IT was dark and sheltered in the yew hedge. The summer air was very sweet. No sound of flute or violin broke the stillness. Only the lesser night noises were to be heard—tiny rustlings, the soft whirr of moths, the crack of a twig, the sudden chirp of a startled bird.

Titian did not know how long she sat there, trying to sift the grain from the whirling chaff of her thoughts.

At last, the sound of approaching steps and voices roused her to a consciousness of her surroundings. She shrank back further into the recess; she did not want anyone to find her here.

The voices became articulate; the steps passed her retreat; she saw the pale glimmer of a girl's dress; heard the clear timbre of a familiar voice in words which cut across the stillness like a whip-lash.

"So you kissed her at last, Cossie? How did she like it?"

"Don't! I lost my head."

The tinkling laugh which came back through the darkness made Titian gasp. She clutched the seat with both hands and sat there incapable of sound or motion as if a nightmare gripped her. Pangs of fierce humiliation seized and rent her. Her brain worked quickly enough now, illumined by that lightning flash.

Toye and Cosmo laughed at her. He had dared to kiss her, and now he made a mock of her. It was nothing to him, but it was no light matter to her. Her pride was in the dust. She had been played with, laughed at. The thought stung.

She bit her lip fiercely to still its trembling. They must never know. She could not bear to think that they should ever fathom the depth of her mortification. She must play the game now as she had told Fenton that she had played it long ago.

At the thought of Fenton, a stab of remorse shot through her. He, at least, had never failed her. In her darkest hours, she had felt the comforting grip of his hand. But she—when he would have leaned upon her, she was as a reed that broke and pierced him. From the background of her thoughts, his eyes looked at her, sorrowfully questioning. In her careless selfishness, she had deliberately hurt

him, her one good friend. She must have been mad. Well, she was sane enough now. Any spell which Cosmo's presence had cast over her was utterly destroyed by that one chance-heard sentence. She despised herself for having fallen under the glamour of his youth and magnetism. A glamour which his passionate kisses had done much to dispel.

She did not know how long she sat there in the blue dusk of night. She was unconscious of everything save the tumult within her.

At last, the power of motion returned to her, and little by little the blood which seemed to have ebbed from her being began to tingle through her veins once more. With a trembling effort, she tried to raise the oriflamme of her pride. All the struggles of the past, all the occasions on which she had fought and conquered and marched with colours flying, came to her aid in this moment of need. She must face her world again with head erect. No one must guess at her humiliation.

She rose to find that her limbs were quivering as if she had had an illness. Slowly at first, but then with quickened steps, she went back along the path down which she had hurried in search of peace.

Peace? She thought to herself with a smile of

bitter self-mockery. She had not found peace but a sword, whose wound still throbbed.

By good luck, she happened on an entrance to the servants' staircase, now deserted, up which she sped unobserved to the shelter of her own room.

There she hastily bathed her face in cool water, and rearranged the golden roses in the waves of her hair. To outward eyes, it was the same Titian, a little paler, a shade less radiant, who descended the stairs some moments later.

She rallied all her forces to her aid as she went slowly downwards; wondering how she was to face the chattering crowd and the partners whom she had deserted; apologising to the couples whom she disturbed on the stairs. Everything seemed to have changed since last she had trodden them. She found the house suffocating, the lights garish, the distant music fretful and thin.

By some curious trick of Fate, Fenton stood as before, waiting in the hall. When she saw him, the impulse seized her to retreat. She stopped for an instant and her heart seemed to cease its beating. She did not want to see him now. She felt as if she could not meet the scrutiny of his eyes, as if she were too spent to face the possibility of another scene. But flight was impossible. The way

behind her was blocked. She must go forward. It was part of the game.

Fenton, watching, saw the little struggle, and wondered with a dull ache in his heart what had happened to dull his Vision Splendid. It was as if the former glowing flame had been quenched, and he felt that he would give anything in the world to have it relighted, whether Trevor or another held the torch.

He had himself well in hand as he went to meet her. No trace of his former emotion remained except that his face, too, wore a quenched look.

"Have you had any supper?" he asked in his most ordinary tone.

Her quick look of relief hurt him a little. Had she imagined then, that he would make a scene?

"I?" she said faintly. "Yes. No. I don't think so."

He took her hand and tucked it within his arm.

"*Pax* and chums," he said softly. "Come and have some with me now."

"Haven't you had any?"

"Not yet. I was waiting."

"For what?"

"You," he answered.

She looked up quickly at that, and her eyes

filled with tears. "That was more than I deserved, Fenty."

"Don't talk nonsense," he said, leading her towards a little table for two.

His curtness did her good, and helped to restore her poise. Surely there was no one like Fenton. There was not another in her world who had never failed her. She rested on his silence while he saw to her needs. He filled her champagne glass.

"Drink that. It will do you good."

"Will it?" she asked, drinking it obediently. "I don't think that I care very much for it."

"It's an acquired taste," he answered. "What will you have now? They offered me truffled larks, but I didn't think that you would care to eat an embodied song."

"Oh, no," she cried. "People don't eat larks, do they?"

"Probably they're only sparrows," Fenton said. "I'll get you some galantine."

"Thank you."

It was such a relief to be ordinary again, to be with someone who understood. In the revulsion of her feeling, it seemed to Titian as if she had found sudden harbour from stormy seas. It was an odd place in which to find peace, this gaily-lit supper-room full of chattering people, where the light

clatter of fork and plate was punctuated by the popping of champagne corks.

There was never any need to talk to Fenton if one did not wish. The bond between them was close enough to permit silence. Titian at intervals studied his face—the unfamiliar contour of cheek and chin, the beautiful lines of his clearly-cut mouth—and wondered if the distraught Adela had ever loved him. It should not be difficult for any woman to love Fenty, she thought vaguely; any woman who really knew him.

"Are you tired?" His voice broke across her musings.

She started. "I think I am, just a little."

"You ought not to dance too much. Remember that you are not used to it."

"Oh, but I have had great practice lately," she began, then stopped, reddening painfully. Her eyes met his. What she read there prompted a hasty, "Fenton, will you forgive me?"

He looked at her searchingly for a moment. "There is nothing to forgive," he answered slowly.

Her lids drooped. She felt chilled; as if she had been put away to a little distance. As if Fenton had accepted the olive-branch but had not taken her hand with it.

The opening of the door let in a strain of music. Titian rose. Fenton rose too.

"Are you dancing this?" he asked.

Glancing at her fan she noticed that the programme was gone from it.

"I've lost my programme," she answered, "but I know that I was engaged for everything."

"I wish you wouldn't overdo it."

"What does it matter?"

"The lost programme will be a good excuse for getting out of those you don't want to dance."

She brightened suddenly, but it was a chilly brightness which puzzled Fenton.

"I thank thee, Fenty, for teaching me that word," she paraphrased lightly. "Will you take me back to the ballroom, please? The pillar near the door is my general rendezvous."

He took her back without a word. Before he left the ballroom, an episode occurred which gave him food for thought.

Near the pillar stood a reproachful partner of Titian's. While she was making belated explanations to him, Cosmo Trevor hurried up. His eyes were bright and his manner a trifle nervous.

"This is ours, I think, Mrs. Fleury," he said, tentatively.

The sound of his voice turned Titian to ice once

more, but with an effort she controlled herself, and faced him with a forced smile. He seemed to have dwindled since last she had seen him.

"I think you are making a mistake," she said coolly. She did not glance towards Fenton, but she was aware of his quiet watchfulness.

"I assure you that I am not," he persisted. It had taken some courage to come up and claim his dance. He pointed to the space in his programme. "This is number 15."

She shook her head. "I have lost my programme," she said, "but I am quite convinced that you are making a mistake. Captain March has been patiently waiting here for me. Haven't you, Captain March?"

"Impatiently, Mrs. Fleury," returned Captain March.

"You see?" she said, turning to Cosmo with an explanatory air.

"I confess that I don't," he returned. "What am I supposed to see?"

"That I have lost my programme," she said lightly. "I cannot remember that any dances are due to you."

She smiled again as she swung away on Captain March's arm, but she suddenly felt very tired and her heart was as heavy as lead.

## CHAPTER IX

### LOVE WITH WINGS

TITIAN awoke next morning to a full sense of some untoward happening. Then she remembered, and with remembrance came swift longing for the shelter of Camus. The pleasures of her visit, once so sweet, had turned to Dead Sea Fruit. She wanted nothing so much as the undisturbed peace, the once-fretting solitude of her own home.

"Going home really is the nicest thing in the world," she thought. "Fenty always knows."

It was strange how her thoughts fled to him in any crisis; how he seemed to be part of her very life. What madness had blinded her to the fact that it was a king's gift which he had been ready to lay at her feet? A gift which she had spurned for a glittering bauble that broke and cut her when she touched it.

A great sadness filled her at the thought. While she had been playing at youth, perhaps she had let

the real thing slip by. She remembered Fenton's passion, then his altered look, and the sadness of the mouth that had said, "There is nothing to forgive."

What had he meant by that? Did he mean that she had shut a door upon herself at which she might knock in vain, or did he mean that it really did not matter? Or yet again was it only her own smallness that read any lesser meaning into the measure of his complete comprehension?

She turned restlessly in her bed. It was strange how the proportions of last night's affairs had altered. The memory of her humiliation had shrunk to a hot pin-prick, while the scene in the conservatory with Fenton now appeared to her as one of life's touchstone moments in which she had been found pitifully wanting.

Her one desire was for flight. She felt as if she could not stay on in this altered atmosphere, as if she never wanted to see Cosmo Trevor or Toye again. She did not want to see Fenton yet either. The thought of her recent attitude towards him humiliated her even more than the remembrance of Cosmo's kiss.

While she racked her brains for an excuse, Fate, in freakish kindness, provided her with one in the shape of news from Camus. Mrs. Brooke, the

housekeeper, had fallen downstairs and broken her leg.

She hastened with her dressing and bade Marshall pack, while she hurried to find Lady Tempest and announce her going.

As she went downstairs, she shared the sense of lassitude which pervaded the house. Everything bore that aspect of tired disarray which is known on the morning after a ball.

After the bustling activities of the past few days, it seemed like a deserted house. Neither boys nor dogs were to be seen. Not even a whistle was to be heard.

She found Lady Tempest seated at her desk in her own little room. She turned a rather tired face towards her as she entered.

"My dear, why did you get up so early?" she asked. "I wanted you to have a good long rest after your triumphs of last night. Hugh and I were very proud of our lovely cousin."

"Dear Mary, you are all too good to me," Titian cried warmly. "Your ball was a huge success. Everything was perfect. It was," she assured herself fiercely. "It was only my own folly that spoiled it for me."

"I don't like to see those dark shadows under

your eyes. Sit down and tell me all about your conquests."

"I want to tell you something else," Titian answered, choosing a chair with its back to the light.

"Yes?" Lady Tempest leaned forward with quickened interest. "Yes, dear?"

"It is only that I must leave you to-day."

"Leave us?" Blank disappointment rang in her tone.

"Yes," Titian went on hurriedly. "I had disturbing news from Camus this morning. My housekeeper, Mrs. Brooke, has fallen downstairs and broken her leg. I must go home at once to see that she is properly looked after."

"But could not someone else——"

"No, I must go myself. I really must. Don't ask me to stay, Mary dear. You have all been more than good to me. You have given me a very happy time, but I must go."

Mary Tempest looked closely at her, and being a wise woman, ceased her persuasions.

"Very well," she returned quietly. "I will not press you any more. I am very sorry. I don't know what the boys and Fenton will say when they come back."

"Where have they gone to?" The thought of their absence brought relief.

"They took lunch with them and went off to Craven Water to fish."

Titian got up and stood for a moment by Mary Tempest's chair. Then she stooped and pressed her cheek against the older woman's.

"You do care for me a little, Mary, don't you?" she whispered.

"My dear, I care for you very much," said Lady Tempest, greatly touched.

Titian said nothing, but squeezed the shoulder she held, almost passionately.

"You are a good friend, a true friend—like Fenty," she said, after an instant.

Then she got up and slipped out of the room, leaving Lady Tempest to wonder what had happened. She was not in the least deceived by the urgency of Mrs. Brooke's need.

Mrs. Brooke was overwhelmed with gratitude at her mistress's attentions, but when Titian had seen to her comfort and paid her one or two daily visits there remained little else to be done. Her presence, if prolonged beyond the necessary ten minutes, only embarrassed the good woman, and conversation was wont to flag.

Titian missed Miss Em's company. The never-failing salt of her conversation had done much to

savour former days. She missed the young companionship which had blown through her life like a spring breeze at Craven. She missed the constant claims of the two boys, the hourly call of unnumbered yet insistent trifles, the games, the merry lessons.

Now time seemed to go on leaden feet. Each once-rounded hour spun to a long thin line. Life seemed a flat affair. She was lonely and her thoughts were but fretting company at best.

She tried to interest herself in her former occupations, but they had lost their zest. She busied herself for hours with Mr. Trant, going over plans, specifications, and accounts until her head ached.

For those dreary days she saw no one but her agent. From him, she learned that Fenton had returned to Belfield. Her outlook brightened at the thought of his coming, but she drooped again when day after day passed without bringing him.

It seemed as if Nature were in league against her as well, because for two whole days the world was obscured in a white pall of fog. Thick webs of mist hid even the wind-shaven trees of the avenue; the grass outside the courtyard was veiled in greyish gauze. Drops gathered, hung, and dropped from window and lintel; ran and pattered from leaf to leaf on the trails of the creeper.

The fog dimmed the sea-sounds, and was pierced only by the recurrent wail of the fog-horn at the lighthouse on the point, discordant and menacing.

Within, the house felt close and airless. Polished surfaces were dimmed with damp; chintz covers felt cold and cheerless to the touch.

Titian had a fire lighted in her sitting-room, and sat by the blaze with Bibi on her lap and Rufus's head against her knee, watching the blue and orange flames crackling upwards through the sticks. She felt very lonely and wondered anew why Fenton did not come.

A letter from Miss Em, re-directed from Craven, brought her some news of the outer world. It appeared that Baldwin was a different man from the deprecating uncared-for being whom she had found at Breston on her arrival.

"Not a stocking to his foot, my dear, nor a button to his shirts! Gwendoline has had the sense to give everything into my charge—a poor wisp of a creature, I must say. She belongs to the peakers and piners, and her ideal is to be ladylike. For instance, she thinks it is ladylike to have a small appetite and to be a poor sleeper! I am sure she thinks me most unladylike because I know the uses of a duster and a sweeping-brush

and have cleaned the windows so that you can now see through them. Tell me about your grand doings whenever you can spare time to write."

Spare time! She could spare time to write an exhaustive chronicle now, but what had she to tell Miss Em?

Nevertheless her letter acted as a spur to thought. Titian rose from her fruitless musings, and fetching her knitting-bag, began to work at a tiny jacket for Miss Em's decried niece or nephew. Her fingers moved quickly; the little garment grew.

A gust of wind shook a patter of drops from the creeper outside. They sounded like the echoing footsteps of her little lost ghosts. Her sense of loneliness deepened. She put the baby's jacket down in her lap, and her tears fell quick as rain.

She dried them hastily lest they should fall on the little garment, and sat gazing into the fire with eyes that saw it as an orange blur.

[ She was awake at last. Now she realised what Fenton had always meant in her life. Now her spirit answered to the call of his, as it had always answered if she had only known. She wanted him, her Fenty, her own man, with her whole heart. It was love that had looked at her from his eyes that night, a love with which she had played, as he had

truly said. It made her pain no easier to bear to know that she had thrust it from her on the impulse of a moment's folly. But Fenty knew. He always understood. Why did he not come?

With the query flashed its answer.

Fenton, for all his gentleness, had a pride as high as her own. That his love was as unalterable as the fixed stars, some inner instinct assured her, but she knew in her inmost being that Fenton was not the man to lay his heart again beneath her feet for her trampling.

Something of his Vision Splendid came to her as she sat there by the fire, and she saw once for all how inextricably her life was knit with his. They had grown together all these years. How was it that she had not known?

He was necessary to her as air, bread, and water —three of the elements, she thought with a soft little smile, making bread typify earth. What of the fourth? Suddenly she remembered the light that had shone in his eyes that night, a light such as she had once seen in Mary Tempest's face. There was the fourth element. Her spirit leaped to meet it as flame to flame.

She hid her burning face in her hands. If Fenton would only come all would be well once more between them. If they once looked at each other

there could be no need for words. It seemed as if a chink of the Gates of the World Invisible opened at the thought.

Perhaps he was waiting for her to make the first move. Could that be the reason of his absence? If it were—it was in her power to give at last, as she had longed to do all her life. She would give with both hands to Fenton, and her very first gift should be her pride.

She got up hastily from the couch and went to her desk. With flushed cheeks and shining eyes she wrote her first love-letter.

"Fenty, dear," it ran, "when are you coming home? The light is still burning.—Titian."

She kissed the paper just below her name, and slipped the letter into an envelope. As she did so, Rufus's tail began to beat the floor. There was a step outside. The door opened and Fenton came in. She turned and their eyes met. Then without a word, she rose and put the letter into his hand.

THE END

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